

Pike County Tick Borne Diseases Task Force

Pike County has experienced a significant increase in confirmed cases of Lyme disease in recent years: from 13 in 2012 to 114 in 2016.

To proactively address this issue, in July of 2013 some concerned citizens, spearheaded by retired educator Mikki Weiss, formed the Pike County Lyme Disease Task Force, now known as the Tick Borne Diseases Task Force. The original intent was to bring awareness to local residents on the complexity of the issue and ways in which more effective medical treatment can be obtained.

Since its inception, the Task Force has worked to decrease the number of tick borne illnesses through public awareness about the prevalence and dangers of tick borne diseases as well as proactive steps that people can take to protect themselves from infection while enjoying the outdoors.

In June of 2014, the Task Force held an educational seminar on tick borne diseases for our county's Alliance of Community Associations. An article about the seminar in *The Pike County Dispatch* newspaper prompted Microbiologist Dr. Robert Ollar to contact the Task Force to offer his expertise. Dr. Ollar became involved with the Task Force and presented an overview of tick borne diseases to the Commissioners. From there we recognized the seriousness of this crisis and embraced it as an important county issue.

In May of 2015, we passed a resolution that appointed the Pike County Tick Borne Diseases Task Force, as volunteer committee, educational arm of the County to provide up-to-date information on prevention, diagnosis and treatment. The Task Force is currently administered by our Community Planning Office, under the auspices of Planning Director Michael Mrozinski and Community Planner Brian Snyder.

To date, outreach has resulted in productive partnerships with Pocono Environmental Education Center, Delaware Valley School District, Pennsylvania Department of Health, East Stroudsburg University, Wayne Memorial Health System, Hemlock Farms Conservancy, and Penn State Extension, among others.

A cornerstone of the Task Force's educational outreach is an easy-to-understand Tick 101 brochure that contains basic information about ticks and tick borne diseases. It was produced with funding from the Pike County Conservation District and the Commissioners. Approximately 8,000 copies have been distributed to local residents.

In collaboration with the Delaware Valley School District, a protocol was developed for school nurses to use when a student reports an embedded tick. Prior to the protocol, a nurse would remove the tick and dispose of it without informing a parent or guardian.

Through the new protocol, guidance is provided on proper tick removal and treatment of the affected area of the skin. Nurses are also instructed to contact a parent or guardian to share the Tick 101 brochure and to inform the parent that he or she may take the tick to be tested.

One of the major achievements of the Task Force is the completion of scientific research that has given insight into the types of ticks and diseases present locally. The Task Force commissioned a pilot study of the county seat of Milford Borough, funded by the Tick Borne Disease Support Network and the Pike County Commissioners. Northeast Wildlife DNA Laboratory of East Stroudsburg University tested 100 blacklegged ticks collected at three sites.

The study, which was completed in June 2018, showed that 51% of the collected ticks carried at least one tick borne disease, and 11% were co-infected with two or three tick borne diseases. The highest infection rate identified was Lyme disease, at 37%. A primary recommendation included screening for all possible tick borne diseases by local doctors to ensure accurate diagnoses.

These results prompted the Task Force to call for a County-wide study, which is again being conducted by Northeast Wildlife DNA Laboratory of East Stroudsburg University. This study, which is in progress, is funded by the Delaware Valley Educational Foundation, Lyme Disease Association, and the Pike County Commissioners.

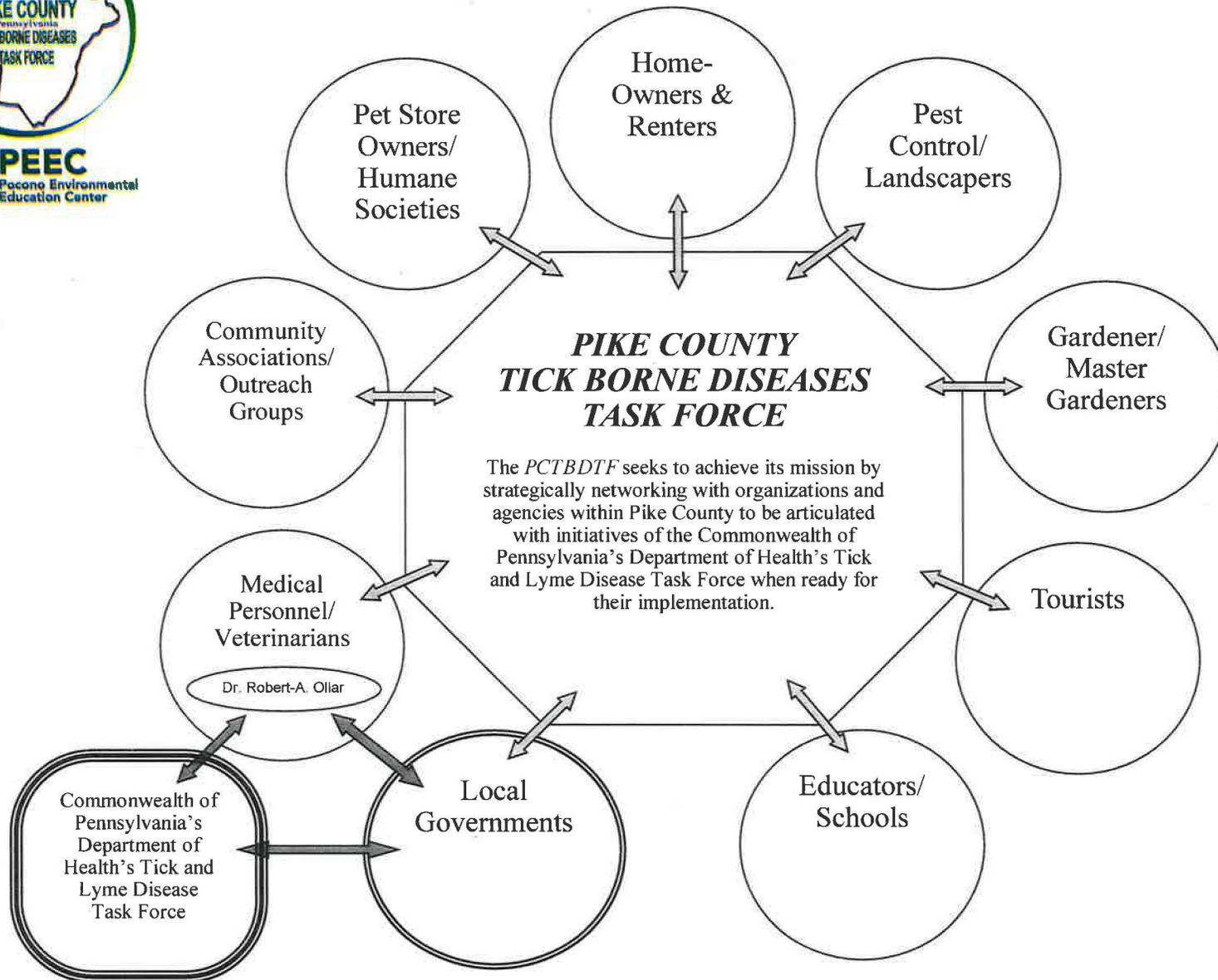
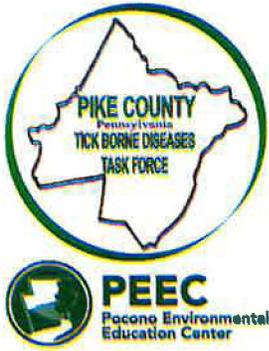
It divides Pike's approximately 546 square miles of land into 9 collection grids from which 100-200 ticks from each grid will be collected and tested. In addition, ticks will be collected from Milford Borough to compare pathogen changes over time and to test for the Powassan virus, which was not included in the pilot study.

The Task Force maintains open lines of communication with elected officials such as Rep. Michael Peifer, Rep. Rosemary Brown, and Senator Lisa Baker. These relationships have fostered an ongoing dialogue on legislation surrounding issues such as continuing education for doctors and mandates that would require health insurance companies to pay for tick-borne disease treatment.

An exciting recent development is a collaboration with Wayne Memorial Community Health Centers, which established a Tick Borne Diseases Wellness Center, in Lords Valley, a first of its kind in the Commonwealth. Here, "Lyme-literate" health care provider Harriet Loizeaux (MSN, FNP) provides evidence-based treatment, diagnostic testing and verification of TBD, and advice for management of symptoms for previously diagnosed patients.

Finally, the Task Force was recently honored with a 2019 Northeast PA Environmental Partner Award, which recognizes its strong partnerships with numerous organizations to raise the level of awareness and education regarding ticks and tick-borne diseases through school nurse tick removal protocols, legislation, and testing.

PCTBDTF NETWORKING & ARTICULATION CHART (DRAFT)



PCTBDTF FOCUS MEETING: October 30, 2014 - 10:00 AM at Pocono Environmental Education Center (PEEC), Dingmans Ferry, PA