

# **News Release**

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## **New sewage program goes into effect Jan. 1 for Knox County homeowners**

After the first of the year, the Knox County Health Department will begin to administer a new program for operation and maintenance of all Knox County households with their own septic systems.

The process is no small task, involving more than 18,000 households. It's part of a statewide update of household sewage rules that was enacted by the Ohio Legislature in 2015 – the first update in nearly 40 years.

The rules establish new modern standards for system construction, alteration and maintenance when a septic system fails or breaks and must be altered or replaced, or a when a new system is installed. The new rules also mandate all homeowners obtain a permit to operate their septic systems and puts in place a routine assessment and maintenance program to be completed for each system every 10 years.

“With such a large number of households and limited staff, it will take some time for the new program to be implemented,” said Environmental Health Director Nate Overholt. “However, we are committed to bringing Knox County in line with the state rules and working with local residents to determine the status of their system and what is best to keep their systems in good working order.”

The new operation and maintenance program was approved by the Knox County Board of Health in September. Overholt said the delay from 2015 to now regarding implementation was to gather input from county stakeholders like septic installers and township officials, “and make sure as many people were informed and onboard with the program before we started implementing it.”

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Under the new operation and maintenance program, the health department hopes to help homeowners extend the life of their septic systems and identify issues before they become problems prompting replacement of a system. Should a system fail, the sewage program staff will offer replacement options just as they currently approve all water and septic system plans for new homes.

“Good design options for systems help protect the financial investment of the homeowner in their system,” said Overholt. “Proper system maintenance ensures systems are sustainable for many years.”

Lower cost, low maintenance systems such as septic tanks to leaching trenches that use the natural soils for treatment are the preferred design and will continue to be the primary system installed in Ohio, said Overholt. New technologies are available for use where the soils present greater challenges for sewage treatment.

Education regarding system maintenance is a key component of the new program. “By far the most common reason for early failure (of a septic system) is improper maintenance by the homeowners,” said Overholt. “When a system is poorly maintained and not pumped out on a regular basis, sludge (solid material) builds up inside the septic tank, then flows into the absorption field, clogging it beyond repair.”

The new rules do not require that all systems must be upgraded. All existing systems are deemed approved under state law until they fail and cannot be repaired.

When a failed system is identified, homeowners can request a timeline for the incremental repair and/or replacement of the system. This spreads system replacement costs out over time and also allows the owner to try common sense solutions like installing water saving fixtures, reducing water usage or fixing leaks to reduce flow to the system.

“Your septic system won’t last forever, but you can extend the life of it and delay expensive replacement with maintenance and replacement of broken parts,” said Overholt. The new sewage system rules do not require everyone to automatically replace their system with new technology. However, you will have to repair or replace your system when it fails- but that’s been the law in Ohio since 1977.

“The new septic system rules give you more options to fix it before it fails and more ways to prevent sewage from making you, your family, your neighbors and your community sick from the germs of septic waste.”

For more information on the new sewage operations and management program for Knox County, call the sewage program staff at the Knox County Health Department at 740-392-2200.

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