

November 18, 2008

The Honorable Harry Reid
Senate Majority Leader
S-221
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
H-232
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Senate Minority Leader
S-230
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable John Boehner
House Minority Leader
H-204
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Reid, Speaker Pelosi, and Minority Leaders McConnell & Boehner:

From first responders to scientists searching for ways to prevent disease, our public health workforce is vital to protecting our nation's health and economy. But our public health workforce is in crisis. There is a serious shortage of public health workers with the expertise needed to meet the depth and breadth of the responsibilities they are expected to carry out.

We are writing to express our support for inclusion of funding for job creation, recruitment and training in a potential stimulus package. In particular, we request that support for the state and local public health workforce be a specifically permissible use of any funding that may be allocated for infrastructure and job training priorities. We believe that in addition to providing funds for infrastructure projects that can immediately create jobs, the stimulus can serve as a vehicle to promote long-term growth and economic development by helping to build a pipeline of well-trained workers, including those entering the public health workforce.

A 2007 survey by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) found that the state public health agency workforce is graying at a higher rate than the rest of the American workforce, and workforce shortages continue to persist in state health agencies. This workforce shortage could be exacerbated through retirements: twenty percent of the average state health agency's workforce will be eligible to retire within three years, and by 2012, over 50 percent of some state health agency workforces will be eligible to retire. Further, according to a 2005 Profile of Local Health Departments conducted by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), approximately 20 percent of local health department employees will be eligible for retirement by 2010.

Public health departments serve an important function by helping to promote health and prevent disease, prepare for and respond to emergencies and potential acts of bioterrorism, investigate and stop disease outbreaks, and provide other services such as immunizations and testing. Yet, the average age of new hires in state health agencies is 40, according to the 2007 ASTHO survey. Public health needs a pipeline of young

workers, and the stimulus offers an important opportunity to begin to cultivate interest in public health among the nation's youth.

Governmental public health can be an important career pathway for displaced workers whose jobs have been eliminated. Public health offers a wide array of possibilities, from epidemiology to information technology (IT) to environmental engineering. Retraining workers to tailor their skills to public health careers would help stimulate job growth and improve the quality of life in communities that are currently underserved due to habitual vacancies in state and local health departments.

As you develop a stimulus package and consider broad infrastructure projects, we ask that you consider the public health workforce to be an important dimension of state and local infrastructure. A sustainable public health workforce is crucial to our economic development and quality of life. Thank you for your attention to this request.

Sincerely,

American Public Health Association
Association of State & Territorial Dental Directors
Association of State and Territorial Directors of Nursing
Association of State & Territorial Health Officials
Association of State & Territorial Public Health Social Workers
Commissioned Officers Association of the U.S. Public Health Service
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists
National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors
National Association for Public Health Statistics and Information Systems
National Association of Chronic Disease Directors
National Association of County and City Health Officials
State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors Association
Trust for America's Health