Keep Communities Healthy by Investing in the Public Health Workforce

The public health workforce is the backbone of our nation’s governmental public health system at the county, city, and state levels. Skilled professionals are the primary resource necessary to deliver public health programs and services: they lead efforts to ensure the safety of the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink. They prepare and respond to disasters like hurricanes, floods, wildfires, and COVID-19.

However, governmental public health was hit hard by the Great Recession, and whereas much of the rest of the public sector workforce has recovered or grown, local and state health departments have not. In fact, local and state health departments have lost more than 20% of their workforce since 2008, shedding over 50,000 jobs across the country.

This deficiency is compounded by the age of the public health workforce — 55% of local public health professionals are over age 45, and almost a quarter of health department staff are eligible for retirement. Between those who plan to retire or pursue jobs in the private sector, projections suggest that nearly half of the local and state health department workforce might leave in coming years. At the same time, competition with the private sector, low pay, and geographic challenges contribute to difficulty recruiting new talent with key public health skills. Combined, these forces indicate a public health workforce crisis that must be addressed.

The nation is positioned to make incredible progress in addressing long-standing public health problems, but health departments need the people to make a difference. And, as the healthcare system has moved rapidly into an electronic data environment, many public health professionals are not equipped with the technology or the skills to engage with these data systems. Public health is dependent on data to identify trends and target resources where they will have the greatest impact. Federal and state governments have invested heavily in healthcare systems that are able to share data, but these investments will not reach their full potential without public health professionals who can harness their potential to improve their communities.

Congress Can Help

COVID-19 has demonstrated the danger of not having the right people in place to respond to an emergency. New staff are joining health departments to help protect the public during this pandemic. The public health system needs to retain these staff long term and help ensure that their experience is harnessed and available to address current as well as future public health emergencies.

Therefore, the Public Health Workforce Coalition calls on Congress to take a first step to invest in the public health workforce, by enacting and implementing a loan repayment program for public health professionals who agree to serve three years in a local, state, or tribal health department.
Such a program, modeled off the success of the National Health Service Corps in bringing healthcare providers to communities in need, will help health departments across the country recruit appropriate staff who can tackle 21st century challenges and increase health departments’ capacity, now and in the future, to keep the public healthy and safe.

While the public health workforce has been cut, serious public health challenges are on the rise:

• COVID-19 is the deadliest public health emergency in a century; public health professionals are fighting to turn the tide by vaccinating the public against the disease.
• The deadliest flu season in a generation occurred in 2017–2018 with 80,000 deaths.
• 2019 saw 1,276 individual cases of measles in 31 states, the most since 1992.
• Syphilis and other STIs are skyrocketing with a 185% increase in congenital syphilis since 2014.
• Vaping among high schoolers has ballooned from 1.5% in 2011 to 27.5% in 2019, reversing the gains made in reducing youth smoking.

Supporting Organizations

3RNet - National Rural Recruitment & Retention Network
AFSCME
Allergy & Asthma Network
Alliance for Aging Research
Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments
American Association for Clinical Chemistry
American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy
American Association of Colleges of Podiatric Medicine
American Association on Health and Disability
American College of Clinical Pharmacy
American College of Preventive Medicine
American Dental Education Association
American Geriatrics Society
American Lung Association
American Organization for Nursing Leadership
American Osteopathic Association
American Podiatric Medical Association
American Psychological Association
American Public Health Association
American Society of Tropical Medicine & Hygiene
Association for Prevention Teaching and Research
Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology
Association of Community Health Nursing Educators
Association of Maternal & Child Health Programs
Association of Nurses in AIDS Care
Association of Public Health Laboratories
Association of Public Health Nurses
Association of Schools Advancing Health Professions
The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to improve the health of communities by strengthening and advocating for local health departments.

For more information and to join the Coalition, please contact:

Adriane Casalotti, MPH, MSW  
Chief, Government and Public Affairs  
National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO)  
acasalotti@naccho.org

Data Sources:

3. 2019 National Profile of Local Health Departments