

03-04

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Public Health Ethics

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) supports the Public Health Code of Ethics developed by the American Public Health Association.¹ This document, updated in 2019, outlines a set of core ethical values and obligations for public health professionals. These ethical values are an evolution of the Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health² developed by the Public Health Leadership Society in 2002.

NACCHO urges all local health departments to adopt the ethical values, analysis and action guidance proposed in APHA's Public Health Code of Ethics. These core values focus on: Professionalism and Trust, Health and Safety, Health Justice and Equity, Interdependence and Solidarity, Human Rights and Civil Liberties, and Inclusivity and Engagement¹. As noted in the Public Health Accreditation Board's 2022 Standards & Measures for Initial Accreditation (2022), local health departments should "foster accountability and transparency within the organizational infrastructure to support ethical practice, decision-making, and governance." This should be done by defining and addressing ethical issues through an explicit, rigorous, and standard manner that uses critical reasoning.³ The impact public health decisions and policies have on individuals in the United States calls for public health professionals and decision makers to adhere to a formal ethical framework.

Justification

NACCHO recognizes the need for a formal ethical framework to achieve the inherently moral central mission of public health in the United States: to protect and ensure the health of the public. The effectiveness of public health institutions depends heavily on the public's trust, and accountability to the public. Public health decisions and actions, rooted in both science and ethics, necessarily take place in a landscape of emergent technology, conflicting and developing legal guidance, stakeholders with intensely divergent views, mis- dis- and malinformation, and limited resources.

Formally incorporating ethics into public health practice promotes the social conditions of capability and opportunity that support individual and community well-being. Well-being, as a broader understanding of "health," exists in a social-relational context. Human rights, liberty, equality, and social and environmental justice inform a contemporary and ethical public health practice. In contrast, the opposite of human flourishing includes not only disease or ill health but also domination, inequity, discrimination, exploitation, exclusion, suffering, and despair.^{4,5} A

formal approach to ethics reflects the moral need to act on available evidence and collect additional information from the community through effective community engagement. Public health actions should incorporate a variety of approaches that reflect a diversity of community needs and perspectives while remaining grounded in scientific evidence and research-based data.⁶

As such, NACCHO recognizes the need for public health practitioners to incorporate ethical principles and processes into all policies and daily decision making as standard practice. Further, NACCHO encourages public health practitioners to advocate that ethics-based deliberative processes are most effective in providing the best practices, grounded in moral justification, for strong public health in our communities.

References

1. American Public Health Association. Public Health Code of Ethics. Retrieved October 6, 2021 from https://www.apha.org/-/media/files/pdf/membergroups/ethics/code_of_ethics.ashx
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3. Public Health Accreditation Board. (February 2022). Standards & measures for initial accreditation. Retrieved February 7, 2024 from <https://phaboard.org/wp-content/uploads/Standards-Measures-Initial-Accreditation-Version-2022.pdf>
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). Public Health Ethics Training Materials. Retrieved July 19, 2019 from <https://www.cdc.gov/od/science/integrity/phethics/trainingmaterials.htm>
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6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Guidelines for defining public health research and public health non-research. October 4, 1999. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/os/integrity/docs/defining-publichealth-research-non-research-1999.pdf>

Record of Action

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