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Pathway Programs:

An Urgently Needed, Valuable Intervention
to Strengthen the Government Public
Health Workforce

Our Workforce Needs a Lifeline

To best serve the public and advance health equity, health departments need a workforce reflective of the communities they serve, including people with relevant identities, lived experience, language skills, and cultural and area knowledge. To recruit and retain this workforce, health departments must be able to successfully reach out to these communities, as well as support employees once hired with competitive wages and clear, accessible opportunities for advancement.

The current reality of the government public health workforce, however, stands far from this ideal. The workforce has been shrinking for more than a decade, and the COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated this trend.¹ One study estimates that the workforce now needs 80,000 additional employees just to provide foundational public health services.² Many systemic barriers stand in the way of recruiting and retaining talent — particularly people from historically underrepresented and underserved communities or others experiencing inequities — complicating the attempt to build the workforce our nation needs.

The National Consortium for Public Health Workforce Development (NCPHWD) has identified public health pathway programs (“Pathway Programs”), particularly those with a focus on people from historically underrepresented and underserved communities, as a successful intervention to diversify and strengthen the government public health workforce, in both the immediate and long term. With support, recognition, and expansion, these programs promise to be a major force in getting more people to join, stay, and advance in government public health jobs.













Public Health Pathway Programs Are a Promising Intervention

While everyone's path into the government public health workforce is different, there are common milestones along the way. These include identifying public health as a desired career, graduating from a degree or training program, obtaining relevant experience and skills, and finding and applying for an open position. For some, this path — or parts of it — can be fraught with challenges.

For example, a person may: be passionate about disease prevention but unaware of public health as a career choice; unable to afford a degree program; or face obstacles that threaten promotion opportunities at work. For people from historically underrepresented and underserved communities, including rural, low-income, and BIPOC communities, these challenges can be even more pronounced. In the face of our shrinking workforce, it is critical that people with the potential to strengthen the workforce have the support they need to navigate these challenges and enter, stay, and thrive in the field.

Broadly defined, Pathway Programs are non-degree granting programs that support people interested in entering public health as a career, enhancing their public health education, and/or furthering their public health career success.

Successful Pathway Programs recognize the complex needs of their participants, as well as the societal systems with which they come in contact. As such, Pathway Programs often include a combination of the following:

-  Academic preparation and support
-  Psychosocial support
-  College, graduate school, and career readiness
-  Career exposure and experience
-  Experiential learning (internships, fellowships, community experience, research)
-  Parental engagement
-  Mentorship
-  Networking opportunities
-  Professional and leadership development
-  Advocacy training and experience

A wide variety of Pathway Programs operate in the United States, including programs tailored to K-12 students, college students, recent graduates, current professionals, and other audiences. Many programs are led by the federal government, while non-profit organizations, educational institutions, health departments, or combinations of stakeholders lead others. Funding for Pathway Programs generally comes from the government, but in many areas, private philanthropy, health employers, educational institutions, and other sources also play a role. Some Pathway Programs operate on a national scale while others focus on local or regional areas.

While individual Pathway Programs are tailored to meet the needs of their audience, they share some commonalities, including a) working to support target demographic(s) to succeed in their current educational and career phases, and b) working to facilitate participants' understanding of and smooth entry into the next step toward a career or leadership position in public health.

Pathway Programs Advancing Equity and Diversity: Examples

The NCPHWD supports the efforts of Pathway Programs rooted in the [Principles of the Ethical Practice of Public Health](#), regardless of audience, age, experience level, or location of focus. We also believe that Pathway Programs focused on supporting people from historically underrepresented and underserved communities to enter the government public health workforce are of particular importance considering growing health inequities across the nation. Examples include:

NATIONAL PROGRAMS

- **CDC John R. Lewis Undergraduate Health Scholars Program:** The Lewis Scholars Program introduces **undergraduate students** to topics in minority health and health equity and supports their career development. The CDC Office of Health Equity partners with select institutes of higher education across the U.S. to deliver a program with specific focus areas within public health and minority health.
- **Health Career Connection:** HCC is a national non-profit that inspires and empowers **undergraduate students, recent graduates, and HCC alumni**, particularly those from underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds, to choose and successfully pursue healthcare and public health careers. HCC connects participants to real-world experience, exposure, mentoring, and networking.
- **Public Health AmeriCorps:** AmeriCorps partners with health departments, nonprofits, and community-based organizations, and focuses on recruiting members who reflect the communities in which they will serve. AmeriCorps members must be **age 17 or older** and serve in roles related to healthcare access, health and housing, substance use, health promotion, community engagement, emergency management, and more.

STATE PROGRAMS

- **Academic Public Health Corps (MA)**
The APHC connects local health departments in Massachusetts with diverse **public health students** from 13 academic institutions across the state. The APHC supports local boards of health through a primarily remote cohort based paid staffing model. Interns are recruited and trained to complete projects of importance to local health during their semester long experience.
- **California Pathways into Public Health Initiative (CA)**
The *Cal-PPH Internship Program* is a semester-long program for **community college, undergraduate, and/or graduate students** from historically underrepresented and diverse backgrounds to gain exposure to public service at local health departments. The *Cal-PPH Fellowship Program* is a 13-month training and job placement program for professionals from historically underrepresented and diverse backgrounds who are interested in launching their public health career at local health departments.
- **Colorado Public Health Works (CO)**
CPHW is an AmeriCorps Apprenticeship program providing career entry into the public health field. Through the program, **AmeriCorps members** serve in regions throughout Colorado. Many simultaneously pursue certification as Community Health Workers through a U.S. Department of Labor-registered apprenticeship designed to increase the capacity of local public health agencies.



More examples of Pathway Programs can be found [here](#).

The Time is Now to Invest in and Support Pathway Programs

Here's How.

Due to the spotlight of COVID-19 and tireless advocacy from public health leaders and allies, many state and local health departments have seen a recent increase in attention and funding, including the CDC's five-year Public Health Infrastructure Grant.

The NCPHWD believes we now have a unique opportunity to create the government public health workforce this nation deserves. This will require aggressive pushes for change to the chronic systemic barriers confronting our public health systems, such as underfunding and outdated hiring and compensation protocols. It will also require effectively linking people from historically underrepresented and underserved communities and skilled in public health to the government public health workforce. We believe Pathway Programs are uniquely positioned to do the latter, and quickly.

Below are calls to action for various stakeholders with the goal of increasing the reach and impact of Pathway Programs in the immediate future and over the long term.



FUNDERS:

(Includes private philanthropy, educational institutions, and federal, state, and local government bodies and officials responsible for budget determination and resource allocation)

- Provide long-term, flexible funding for Pathway Programs to support staffing, infrastructure, participant stipends, participant tracking, and program evaluation so that programs can realistically strengthen scale, sustainability, and impact.
- Provide living wage stipends, provide temporary housing, and/or cover relocation expenses for relevant program experiences (e.g., Public Health AmeriCorps).
- Fund national efforts to form a large-scale ecosystem of Pathway Programs, including the National Alliance for Public Health Pathways, with the purpose of sharing best practices, advocating for additional support for Pathway Programs, and developing coordinated experiences across programs for individuals.
- Convene Pathway Programs and state and local health departments to develop coordinated plans to expand partnerships within the state or region to meet workforce needs.
- Fund the development and maintenance of a national inventory of Pathway Programs.



HEALTH DEPARTMENT LEADERS:

- Cultivate relationships with Pathway Programs serving your jurisdiction. Partner to develop internship, fellowship, and/or other opportunities for program participants at the health department, including career enrichment opportunities for current staff.
- Consider developing a Pathway Program within the health department itself, looking to existing health department programs for guidance ([here's an example](#)).
- Work with human resources to develop a process that creates an easy to navigate pipeline from participating in a Pathway Program to being offered a staff position.
- Ensure current health department staff working with Pathway Program participants are properly trained and supported to guide participants through the site's applied learning program.



PATHWAY PROGRAM LEADERS:

(Includes all institutions and organizations leading programs, including nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, federal departments, health departments, etc.)

- Develop or expand Pathway Programs' focus to include government public health in partnership with health departments. Seek out partnerships with health departments to host participants.
- Partner to ensure that Pathway Program training is aligned with the needs and requirements of the institution(s) participants hope to enter as students, interns, fellows, or staff, such as degree programs and government careers.
- Adapt your program to the realities of government public health, including preparing participants to navigate the civil service system.
- Evaluate program success, track alumni, and share impact.
- Formally connect students with alumni who work in government public health and can guide participants into the next stage of their career development.



PUBLIC HEALTH MEMBERSHIP ORGANIZATIONS:

- Promote the value of Pathway Programs to health department leaders and workforce development directors and link them with existing programs.



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1. Bipartisan Policy Center. Public Health Forward: Modernizing the U.S. Public Health System. December 2, 2021. Accessed October 16, 2023. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BPC_Public-Health-Forward_R01_WEB.pdf
2. de Beaumont Foundation, The Public Health National Center for Innovations. Staffing Up: Workforce Levels Needed to Provide Basic Public Health Services for All Americans. de Beaumont Foundation. October 2021. Accessed October 16, 2023. <https://debeaumont.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Staffing-Up-FINAL.pdf>