



Onboarding New Health Department Staff: Best Practices

Insights to Action is a suite of resources meant to help state and local public health agencies improve recruitment and retention by acting on their data from the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS). Find more tools like this at <http://debeaumont.org/programs/insights-to-action/>.

In addition to completing paperwork, onboarding provides new employees an opportunity to learn about and build a sense of belonging in their new workplace. Fostering a positive experience in an employee's first few weeks can help build knowledge, confidence, and strong professional relationships – all of which can positively impact success and retention long-term. Below are some practices that state and local public health agencies can leverage to improve onboarding.

Encourage relationship building

A sense of belonging is key to work satisfaction and employee retention, and nothing fosters belonging like strong relationships with colleagues. Encouraging new employees to set up introductory coffee chats with everyone in their department, for example, is a great way to help them build relationships from the beginning. Directly connecting new employees with others who might have shared interests is a great way to encourage work friendships. Especially for employees under 35, who only make up 25% of the public health workforce nationally, connecting with peers is integral to helping them feel like they belong.

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024, supports the government public health workforce by measuring strengths and gaps to inform future investments in funding, training, recruitment, and retention.

PHWINS
PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE
INTERESTS AND NEEDS SURVEY

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Provide an agency overview

New employees need to understand what every team at the agency does – not just their departments. Not only does this help employees understand and align with the mission, but it also helps expose them to other public health careers. This can foster retention by educating entry-level employees about potential future opportunities. Additionally, being able to speak fluently about what each team at an agency does will help staff effectively represent the health department's brand in the community and at events like career fairs.

Adopt a foundational public health curriculum

Only 20% of employees at state and local public health agencies have public health degrees (PH WINS 2024). For that reason, providing a foundational public health curriculum to new employees is integral to helping new staff understand and advance the agency's mission. [New to Public Health at the University of Wisconsin](#) is an online, cohort-based program that health departments can leverage for this purpose. Additionally, the cohort-based program allows individuals to participate together, fostering relationships between employees who join the agency around the same time.

Train new employees to navigate internal processes

Government bureaucracy can be daunting, especially for employees joining from other sectors. To best support new employees, government agencies must offer training(s) to new employees detailing agency processes and how to navigate them. Better yet, match new employees with a mentor who can help them navigate these processes.

Establish a mentoring program

Mentoring programs have a number of benefits, one of which is connecting new employees to someone who can help them acclimate to workplace culture and learn about different public health career trajectories. Offering to match new employees with a mentor helps them build relationships and provides them with someone besides their supervisor that they can use as a resource.

Convene onboarding peer groups

Onboarding groups are cohorts of employees who start around the same time and go through the onboarding process together. Not only does this streamline work for the agency employee conducting the onboarding, but it also provides new employees with opportunities to build relationships with and lean on one another. [Read more on how to convene onboarding peer groups.](#)
