



Public Health's Youngest: Perspectives of the Islands' Workforce Age 35 and Under

Nearly one-third (32%) of the Islands' public health employees are age 35 years and under. Concerningly, 21% of these employees said they intend to leave in the next year, a proportion higher than other employees.

Introduction

U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States (T/FAS) face **heightened public health challenges because of their geographic remoteness, limited local resources, and significant exposure to climate-related risks**. Most affected are the people living on these islands, and T/FAS public health and health care workers striving to improve the health of their communities. Additionally, 5 in 10 employees age 35 and under want to make a difference in their community through a job in government public health. By understanding and addressing the needs, characteristics, and strengths of this young workforce, public health departments can better retain future leaders.

This data brief highlights the perceptions and experiences of employees age 35 and under who work in T/FAS. The 2024 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) was expanded for the first time to include U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States. The PH WINS Islands Pilot was conducted in partnership by the de Beaumont Foundation, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), and the Pacific Islander Health Officers Association (PIHOA) in early 2025. This pilot survey captured the



The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) supports the government public health workforce by measuring strengths and gaps to inform future investments in funding, training, recruitment, and retention. It is the only nationally representative source of data about the government public health workforce. PH WINS was conducted with state and local health departments in 2014, 2017, 2021, and 2024. For the first time, PH WINS was conducted among U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States ("Islands") in early 2025. This report presents data from the PH WINS Islands Pilot.

Introduction, continued

voices of over 2,500 employees who work in eight T/FAS, more than 800 of whom were age 35 and under. Respondents anonymously shared insights about their satisfaction and engagement, training strengths and needs,

workplace well-being, intent to stay or leave, community engagement, and general demographics. The survey also included a set of questions specifically exploring the motivations and pathways of these younger employees.

Key Findings

Nearly one-third (32%) of the Islands’ government public health workforce is 35 years of age and younger. The age groups most represented in the young workforce are those between the ages of 26 and 30 (45%) and 31 and 35 (44%).



Many young professionals come to government public health from other industries.

A majority of young public health professionals (61%) joined their health department from another job, and among that group, over half (52%) came from positions outside of public health and government. About 1 in 5 young professionals (21%) were in academic, fellowship, internship, or volunteer programs six months before joining their health department. Of those coming from academia, fellowships, internships, or volunteer programs, one-quarter (25%) were between the ages of 20 and 25, and three-quarters (75%) were between the ages of 26 and 35.

Respondents cited many factors that drew them to a career in government public health. In particular, 62% of young professionals report that salary is what attracted them to a career in government public health. Other factors

that attracted this population to government public health included the ability to make a difference in the population they serve, work/life balance, personal satisfaction their job gives them, and the potential for career advancement.



More than 1 in 5 young public health employees (21%) said they intend to leave their organization in the next year.

Young employees' intention to leave is 9% higher than that of employees over age 35. While pay, lack of opportunities for advancement, and stress are all among the top five reasons for leaving, as identified by employees older than 35, a larger proportion of the young workforce identified each as a reason for leaving. For example, nearly half (49%) of the young workforce selected the lack of opportunities for advancement as a reason for leaving. In contrast, only 35% of those older than 35 identified that as a reason for leaving. Notably, more than half (52%) of young employees identified better on-island opportunities outside the agency as a reason for leaving, compared with 24% of those over age 35.

Top 5 Reasons Young Employees Intend to Leave Their Agency

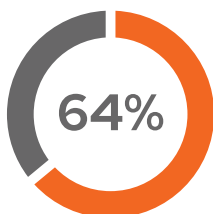


Burnout is a key concern for employees who are 35 and under.

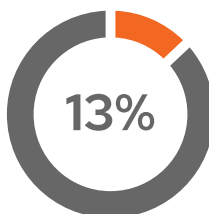
A third of young employees who intend to leave (33%) identified work overload/burnout as one of their reasons for leaving. The PH WINS Islands Pilot defines burnout as physical, mental, and behavioral exhaustion caused by excessive stress, particularly in the workplace. More than

half (51%) of those age 35 and under reported having one or more symptoms of burnout that come and go away. Furthermore, 10% reported one or more symptoms that won't go away, and an additional 3% reported being completely burnt out.

64% of young employees reported experiencing one or more symptoms of burnout.



13% reported near constant symptoms of burnout.



Nearly one in five young employees (18%) rated their mental or emotional health as either "fair" or "poor."

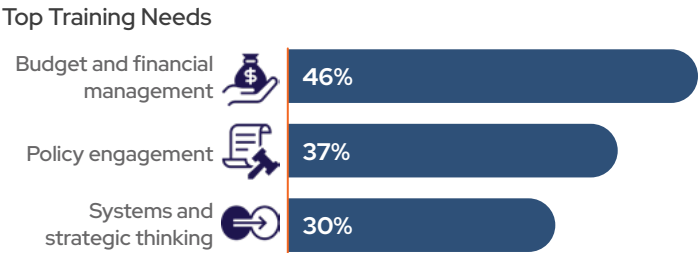


Young professionals reported strong programmatic expertise but said they lack the necessary skills to drive projects, programs, and plans forward.

Respondents to the PH WINS Islands Pilot were asked to rate the importance of 23 skills (22 for non-supervisors) to their day-to-day jobs. They were then asked to rate their proficiency level for the skills identified as very important or moderately important. Training needs are defined as skills that are of high importance but in which employees report low proficiency. Most workers age 35

and under (86%) stated that expertise in their program area is important to their day-to-day work and that they are highly skilled in the content area and technical skills needed to perform. They also stated they are highly proficient in communicating effectively (91%) and analyzing data to make decisions (88%).

However, some gaps remain. Young employees reported lacking the skills needed to effectively manage budgets and finances (46%), engage with policy development (37%), and think systemically and strategically about their jobs or organization (30%), even though they identified those skills as highly important to their day-to-day work.



Formal public health training is more common among young professionals than those over age 35.

Young employees increasingly earn post-secondary public health degrees (29%) compared to their older counterparts (21%). Employees age 35 and under are also more likely to hold a master’s degree (31%) than those older than 35 (22%).

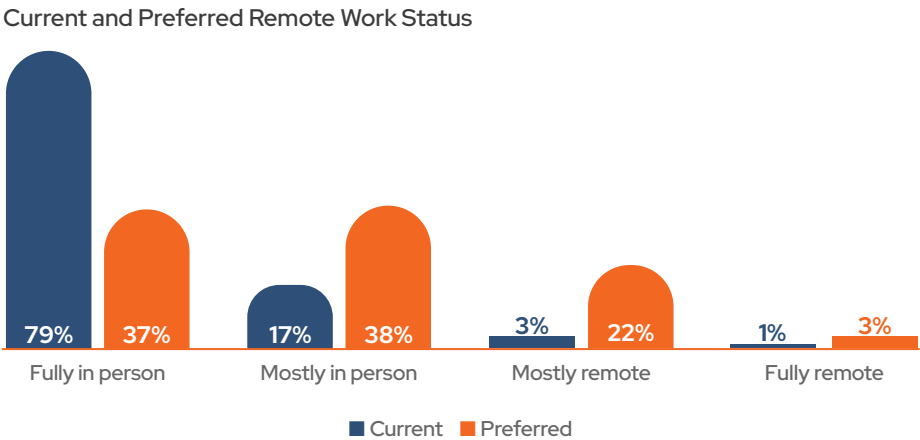
Employees are generally satisfied and engaged at work. However, satisfaction with pay and benefits is low.

Employees age 35 and under said they are generally satisfied with their work, with large majorities reporting satisfaction with their job (93%), organization (80%), supervisors (86%), and work unit (88%). In addition, 79% felt a sense of belonging at their agency, and 87% felt a sense of belonging within their work unit.

However, satisfaction with pay and benefits is low, with only about half of employees age 35 and under (51%) satisfied with their benefits and 61% satisfied with their pay.

Flexible work is a hot commodity for professionals age 35 and under.

Most public health workers age 35 and under (63%) said they want to be able to work from home at least part of the time. While 79% said they currently work fully in person, only 37% prefer this arrangement. Most younger employees (82%) said they wanted the option of ad-hoc remote work, allowing flexibility to work from home for a scheduled medical appointment or to care for a sick child.



Most young public health employees want to stay in government public health.

Along with the satisfaction many feel in their work, more than three-quarters of the young public health workforce (79%) planned to stay at their organizations. Flexibility (e.g., flex hours/telework) and support from coworkers are top reasons for staying. In addition, many reported job stability (45%) and pay (44%) as a reason for staying as well.

Top 5 Reasons for Staying in Government Public Health



Conclusion

The future of the Islands’ public health and health care workforce depends on recruiting and retaining younger staff. Currently, employees age 35 and under represent nearly one-third of this workforce, and 1 in 5 intend to leave in the next year. Given the longstanding barriers T/FAS experience, the departure of these emerging leaders would be detrimental to the Islands’ public health infrastructure.

The PH WINS Islands Pilot results provide important insight into the mindset of younger workers and their journey into the field. With these findings, public health agencies can develop strategies to retain younger employees already in the workforce and recruit new talent into the field.

To strengthen retention efforts, agencies must prioritize addressing workplace burnout, which remains a major factor in a shrinking workforce and is more prevalent in the Islands due to socio-cultural norms that may undervalue younger workers contributions. They can also explore creating different career paths and leadership training to help staff age 35 and under move into future leadership roles, as Guam has done through its **Governor’s Summer**

Youth Employment Program. The younger workforce can develop their skills and boost their impact with proper training and resources. The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands has provided such support by creating junior-level positions to **mentor and upskill staff** into difficult-to-fill roles.

Many young professionals report positive experiences in their workplaces. Almost 9 in 10 (86%) are satisfied with their supervisor, and 53% feel supported by colleagues. In addition, 79% feel a sense of belonging in their agency, and 87% feel the same sense of belonging within their work unit. These findings underscore the value of strong relationships and inclusive, thriving workplaces.

A dedicated and thriving public health workforce is the foundation of healthier, more resilient communities across the U.S. Territories and Freely Associated States. By investing in the growth and development of the workforce, we ignite the potential of young professionals who will carry the mission forward—serving as tomorrow’s health officers, directors, and community leaders.

Methodology

The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS) Islands Pilot was developed by the de Beaumont Foundation in partnership with the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the Pacific Island Health Officers' Association (PIHOA) to understand the interests and needs of the government public health workforce in the United States Territories and Freely Associated States.

The PH WINS Islands Pilot was conducted in 8 United States Territories and Freely Associated States. The 2025 survey was distributed online to 8,913 government public health workers. The survey was completed by 2,556 employees, for a 28% response rate of eligible employees.

For more information, visit www.phwins.org.

Next for PH WINS

Complete results from the PH WINS Islands Pilot, along with dashboards featuring dynamic data visualization, will be released in November 2025. Other topics covered in the survey include:

- The state of the epidemiology workforce, including training needs specific to the discipline;
- Demographics of the workforce by age, ethnicity, sex, tenure, education, and more;
- Workforce characteristics such as sector, supervisory status, program area, and job type;
- Training needs and strengths based on the recommended [Strategic Skills for Public Health Practice](#);
- Guidance for recruiting and retaining a skilled and effective workforce; and
- Strategic insights for developing skilled managers in government public health.

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