

Navigating Challenges in Public Health Pathway Programs

Public Health Pathway Programs (PHPP) build up the public health workforce by developing the next generation of public health professionals. PHPPs provide agencies with a stream of candidates equipped with the necessary skills and experience to strengthen and diversify the workforce. Health agencies can engage with these programs in multiple ways, most commonly as a grantee or host site. A grantee is funded directly by the grantor to administer a PHPP program; a host site receives participants in the PHPP, providing supervision and experiential learning opportunities. A health agency can take on one or both roles. Additionally, health agencies can partner with community-based organizations to implement the program, thereby expanding their reach and building ties with trusted partners in the community.

Challenges such as funding, cultural adaptation, and communication among PHPPs serving the same community are common for public health agencies looking to establish or engage with PHPPs. This document shares challenges, solutions, and resources for health agencies looking to leverage PHPPs. It is informed by ASTHO's engagement with PHPPs like [Public Health AmeriCorps](#) and the [ASTHO Public Health Equity Corps](#), as well as jurisdictions' experiences successfully leveraging PHPPs to improve their health workforces.

What is a Public Health Pathway Program?

[Public Health Pathway Programs](#) are non-degree granting programs designed to support people interested in pursuing or advancing careers in public health. These programs offer diverse learning experiences (e.g., internships, fellowships, community experience, research), mentorship, networking opportunities, and professional development to enhance participants' education and career success.

Challenge: Funding and Capacity Building

As public health agencies consider utilizing PHPPs, leadership may identify concerns about whether the health agency has both funding and staff time and capacity to develop a program as a grantee, implement the program, and sustain the program. Three strategies can help address these challenges:

1. **Participating as a Host Site:** Agencies can participate as host sites for established PHPPs like the [CDC Public Health Associate Program](#). In this model, agencies provide dedicated staff to supervise and mentor participants while the established PHPP funds the participant's salary or stipend. This reduces the financial burden on the agency and allows them to benefit from the additional workforce without the need for extensive funding.

2. **Offering Supervisory Experiences:** Even when constraints around funding support participants are addressed, agencies are still challenged by capacity limitations exacerbated by the ongoing staffing shortage in governmental public health. Agencies can use PHPPs to offer supervisory experiences to current employees interested in gaining leadership and managerial experience. This not only builds capacity but also provides professional development opportunities for existing staff.
3. **Promoting Training Opportunities:** To ensure that staff are adequately trained to supervise participants, agencies can promote existing training opportunities and resources, such as [management online courses](#) offered by the National Association of County and City Health Officials and the [supervisor online course](#) offered by the Western Region Public Health Training Center. This ensures that both participants and supervisors have a positive and productive experience.

Challenge: Cultural Adaptation

Another major challenge for PHPPs is the adaptation of training curriculums and core competencies to incorporate the cultural aspects and unique needs of specific communities, such as the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands and tribal nations. Public health agencies express concerns about the tendency of national programs to adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, which may not adequately address the specific needs of their communities. Agencies can seek out existing PHPPs tailored to meet the needs of their community, such as the [Pacific Public Health Fellowship Program](#), which was developed to address the public health needs of the U.S. Affiliated Pacific Islands.

Agencies with the necessary dedicated funding and capacity can seek to establish their own PPHPs tailored to their communities' needs. Agencies can leverage existing guidance and resources from experienced organizations. The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene [developed comprehensive guidance for developing a PPHP](#), which can serve as a roadmap for other agencies looking to establish similar programs. While these guidance materials can provide valuable insights and strategies, it's essential for agencies to adapt these resources to their local context. This may involve considering factors such as population demographics, public health priorities, available resources, and existing infrastructure when designing and implementing PPHPs.

One example is the [California Pathways into Public Health \(Cal-PPH\) program](#), which prioritizes providing opportunities for people from historically underrepresented and diverse backgrounds through fellowships and internships, as well as providing culturally competent training and hands-on experience. Interns and fellows are placed in local health departments across the state where they gain hands-on experience. The program leverages educational partners to create a training curriculum that reflects California's cultural and linguistic diversity.

Challenge: Communication and Partnership Building Among PPHPs

PPHPs are a great tool, but when multiple programs serve the same community, program creators and implementers must carefully coordinate to avoid inefficiencies and imbalanced incentives. For example, a health agency that leverages multiple PPHPs without sufficient internal coordination can struggle with duplicative efforts and inconsistent compensation structures for participants, including support for items like housing and transportation.

Differences in stipends or salaries among participants in similar roles within different programs may create tension and affect their experiences, potentially impacting the program's reputation in the region.

To tackle these challenges, public health agencies can serve as connectors, bringing together the organizations running the PHPPs to foster collaboration and communication. By organizing joint meetings and forums, these agencies provide a platform for stakeholders to discuss priorities, advocate for fair compensation, address common obstacles, and explore opportunities for collaboration. By partnering with their local government and community organizations, public health agencies can help secure affordable housing options or other financial assistance to alleviate the financial burden on participants. For example, the Washington State Legislature approved bills ([HB 1176/SB 5247](#)) that will provide small increases in benefits for AmeriCorps members, ensuring better support and reducing financial burdens for those serving in the program.

Benefits of PPHPs

PHPPs present a valuable opportunity for governmental public health agencies to expand their workforce by leveraging the skills of the new generation of public health professionals. Workforce development directors and executive leaders play a critical role in exploring opportunities to use PHPPs to strengthen their workforce. ASTHO remains committed to providing resources aimed at facilitating increased engagement between these leaders and PHPPs. By exploring diverse engagement strategies, seeking external capacity-building options, and building partnerships with public health workforce stakeholders, governmental public health agencies can effectively incorporate PHPPs within their organizations, either by establishing their own programs or serving as host sites.

Resources

- **Public Health AmeriCorps:** The [Public Health AmeriCorps](#) program offers opportunities for individuals to serve in public health roles across the United States, supporting health departments and community organizations. By partnering with AmeriCorps, public health agencies can strengthen their workforce.
- **CDC Funding Opportunities:** The [CDC Fellowships and Training Opportunities](#) web page offers many host site opportunities for public health initiatives, including internships and fellowships.

- **Professional Organizations:** Organizations such as the [American Public Health Association](#), [National Association of County and City Health Officials](#), and [ASTHO](#) offer resources and support for implementing experiential programs. Agencies can leverage these organizations' guidance and networks to enhance their program implementation efforts.
- **Public Health Foundation:** The Public Health Foundation provides training, tools, and resources for public health professionals, including academic health department resources and [guidance on mentorship and supervision](#).

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