

05-08

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Education and Recruitment of Public Health Nurses

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recognizes the importance of the Public Health Nurse as a part of public health interprofessional practice. NACCHO also recognizes the challenges related to recruiting and retaining qualified public health nurses while also facing significant cuts in funding from the federal, state, and local government.

Public health agencies have experienced a reduction in their workforce capacity, including public health nurses. In 2013, the estimated size of the workforce of registered nurses at local health departments was 27,700, whereas the estimate for the same workforce in 2008 had been 32,900.¹ This decrease negatively impacts existing public health services, and impairs effective response to emerging public health priorities such as infectious and chronic diseases and improving population health outcomes.

NACCHO supports the following:

- Enhancing scholarship and loan repayment programs to mitigate the public health workforce shortage;
- Increased federal funding for health professions training programs such as the National Health Service Corps and Titles VII and VIII of the Public Health Service Act;
- Increased federal funding to programs encouraging minorities and persons from underserved areas to enter into the health and nursing professions; Reducing the debt burden for underrepresented individuals through loan forgiveness programs and tuition reimbursement strategies;
- Increased federal funding for traineeships that support Advanced Public Health Nursing (APHN) education;
- Integrating public health nursing rotations, including population-based clinical experiences, into nursing school curricula;
- Increased access to online training and degree programs;
- Promoting public health nursing as a professional option, not simply a component of nursing curricula;
- Funding for current Diploma and Associate Degree public health nurses to return to school for completion of Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN), allowing them to increase their knowledge and skills in social determinants of health, leadership, and public health nursing practice;
- Pilot testing nurse residency programs to help with recruitment and retention of public health nurses;

- The Health Resources and Services Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, state health departments, and universities increasing the availability of continuing education and professional development for public health nurses as a means of retaining and strengthening the Local Health Department workforce through mechanisms such as online training, webcasts, and scholarships;
- Increased funding opportunities for evidence-based and outcomes research related to public health nursing practice and interventions;
- Encouraging students with an existing college degree to pursue nursing as a second degree; and
- Parity in salaries for public health nurses and nurses in other areas of clinical practice.

NACCHO encourages local health departments to do the following:

- Provide nursing internship opportunities;
- Increase public health training opportunities for nursing professionals;
- Increase the availability of supplemental education for public health nurses as a means of retaining and strengthening the local health department workforce;
- Insist public health nurses practice to full scope of their license; and
- Partner with schools of nursing for student clinical experience, public health nursing staff continuing education, dissemination of evidence-based practice interventions for public health nurses, and joint research and evaluation projects to enhance the evidence base for public health nursing practice.

NACCHO will seek partnerships with local health departments and nursing organizations, such as the Association of Public Health Nursing, the Association of Community Health Nursing Educators or the Quad Council for Public Health Nursing in order to enhance the visibility of public health nursing and enhance public health nursing educational opportunities for practicing nurses and students.

Justification

Public health nurses focus on the health of populations and working with communities and the individuals and families who live within them. With an emphasis on prevention, their practice is multi-faceted and has resulted in positive health outcomes including enhanced surveillance; higher rates of breastfeeding; reductions in pre-term births, low birth weight rates and improved behavior; education; and employment. The following statistics provide rationale for ensuring adequate quantity and quality of trained nurses at local health departments:

- Public health nurses employ practices grounded in social justice, driven by epidemiological evidence, and involving community collaboration.²
- Public health nurses comprise a large percentage of the entire local health department workforce—19% of all local health department staff in 2013. Ninety-six percent of local health departments employ public health nurses.³
- Many local health departments experience problems hiring professional occupations, including public health nurses. The most common reasons cited among local health departments for difficulty in hiring public health nurses include uncompetitive pay (77%) and benefits (44%), budgetary cuts (63%), and difficulty in attracting candidates to geographic area (45%).¹

- The estimated total employment of registered nurses by local health departments decreased by approximately 5,000 FTEs between 2008 and 2013. This underscores the need to support policies and initiatives that support the recruitment and retention of qualified public health nurses.⁴

References

1. NACCHO. (2013). 2013 National Profile of Local Health Departments Study. Retrieved from <http://www.naccho.org/topics/infrastructure/profile/upload/2013-National-Profile-of-Local-Health-Departments-report.pdf>
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3. Minnesota Department of Health Center for Public Health Nursing. (2004). Cornerstones of Public Health Nursing. Retrieved February 4, 2009, from http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/cfh/ophp/resources/docs/cornerstones_definition_revised2007.pdf.
4. University of Michigan Center of Excellence in Public Health Workforce Studies. Public Health Workforce Enumeration, 2012. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan; 2013.

Additional Resources:

Future of Nursing: Institute of Medicine. (2010). The future of nursing: Leading change, advancing health. Retrieved from http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=12956&page=R1

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Record of Action

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