

Challenges Facing Wisconsin's Public Health Workers



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Wisconsin Public Health Association

- Wisconsin's largest public health professional membership organization
- The collective voice for public health in WI

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Level-setting: What is Public Health?

- General public (pre-pandemic): *free clinics?*
- General public (post-pandemic): *lockdowns, mask mandates*
- Even many healthcare professionals have only a vague grasp of the scope, responsibilities, and value of public health

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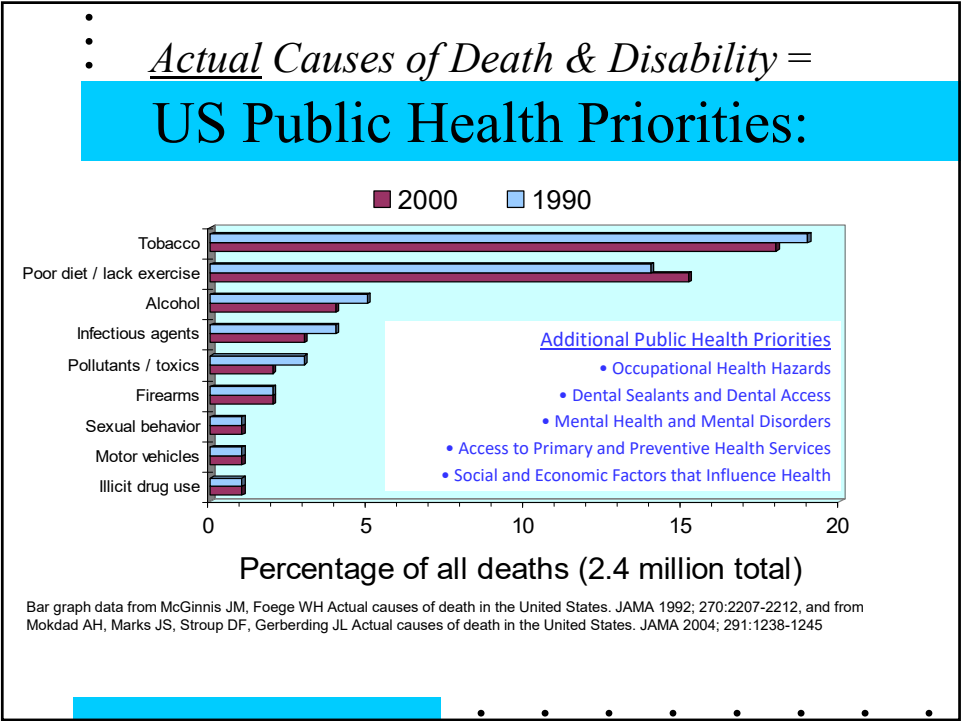
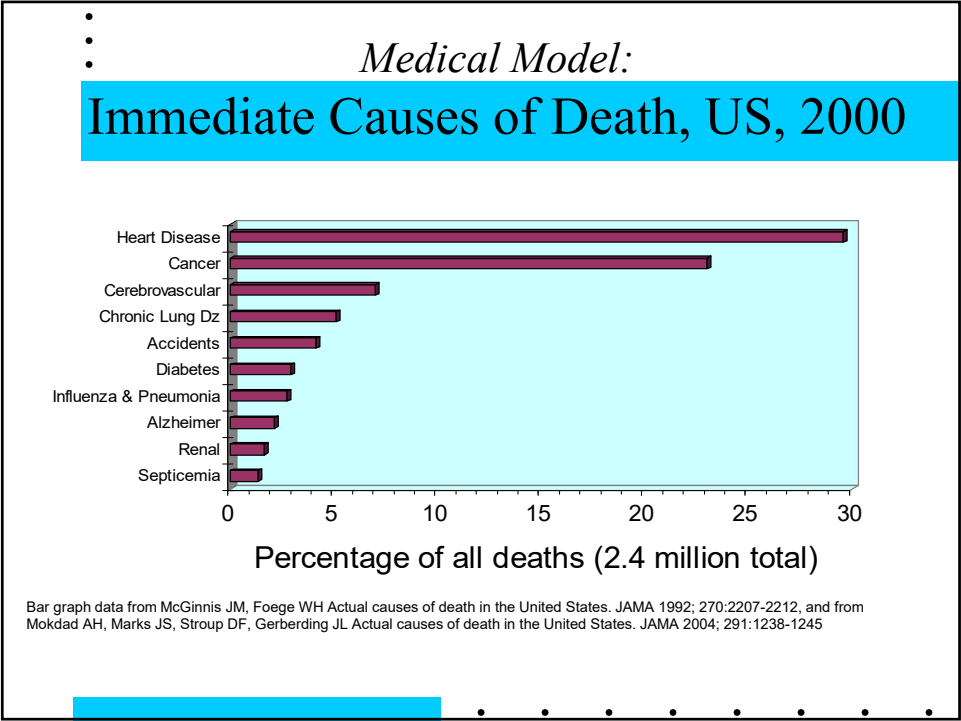
Public Health ≠ Healthcare

- “Health care matters to all of us some of the time, public health matters to all of us all of the time.”* – C. Everett Koop
- Health Care: Preventing, detecting, and curing disease *for an individual*
 - Public Health: Preventing disease through organized, *population level effort*
 - “What we do, collectively, to assure the conditions in which people can be healthy”
– (Institute of Medicine)

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– Bunker JP, Frazier HS, Mosteller F. *Milbank Quarterly* 72(2), 1994, pp 225-258.

- Safer workplaces
- Safer and healthier foods
- Healthier mothers and babies
- Family planning
- Recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard
- Decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke
- Control of vaccine-preventable and other infectious diseases
- Fluoridation of drinking water
- Motor-vehicle safety



Impact of Public Health in WI

- Everyone in Wisconsin, and especially
 - underserved populations and disinvested neighborhoods
 - both urban and rural parts of the state
- Employers and the Wisconsin economy
 - When Wisconsinites are less healthy, they are less productive, and healthcare expenses rise
 - But every \$1 invested in public health returns \$4 in downstream cost savings

Public Health System: Partners

- Governmental Partners
 - Local Health Departments (LHDs)
 - Tribal Health Departments
 - State Health Department (DHS, DPH)
 - Federal Health Agencies (CDC, FDA, OSHA, etc)
- Nongovernmental Partners
 - Community-based Nonprofits & Civic Groups
 - AODA and Mental Health Providers
 - Healthcare Systems and Providers
 - Policymakers, and Many Others

Typical LHD Responsibilities (1)

- Immunizations
- Fetal Infant Mortality Review
- WIC
- Medicaid Outreach
- Violence Prevention
- Mom/baby home visits
- Adolescent School Health and Pregnancy Prevention

- Breast & Cervical Cancer screening
- Tobacco Prevention
- Cardiovascular Health
- Community Nutrition
- Lead Poisoning Prevention
- Asthma
- Unintentional Injury

Highlights

Typical LHD Responsibilities (2)

- Food Safety and Restaurant Inspection
- Tattoo & Piercing
- Weights & Measures
- Fire Safety Inspections
- Convenience Stores
- Sales Ordinances
- Air and Water Quality

- Emergency Preparation and Response
- Communicable Disease Reporting and Follow-up
- STD / HIV / TB
- Refugee Screening
- Environmental Audits
- Toxics Management

Highlights

Public Health Workers - Examples

- A health educator who works with community members and groups to design, implement and evaluate health promotion programs
- A community nutritionist who educates individuals, families and communities about proper nutrition
- A laboratorian who tests environmental or human samples
- An epidemiologist who tracks disease outbreaks, ranging from influenza to food-borne illness, and develops ways to prevent and control their spread
- An occupational safety and health specialist who designs programs to prevent and control workers' risks and injuries, ranging from environmental to ergonomic

Public Health Workers - Examples

- A restaurant and food service inspector ensuring the safety of the food supply
- A public health nurse giving immunizations to children and adults, investigating a communicable disease outbreak, or providing prenatal education in the community or at a clinic
- A public health physician who plans, provides and administers public health services or programs
- A sanitarian who controls & eliminates environmental health hazards in homes or in the water supply
- A wide range of other individuals working with communities: educators, community planners and emergency responders

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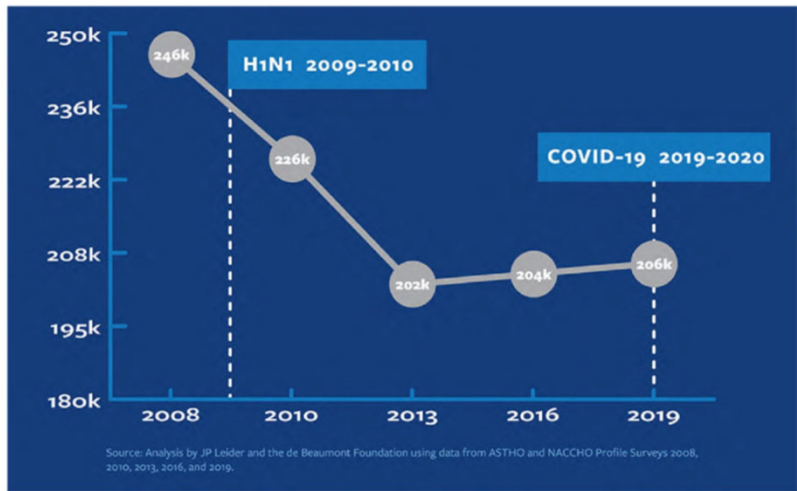
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• <https://www.governing.com/work/what-will-it-take-to-recruit-and-retain-public-health-workers>

Shrinking US Workforce (Pre-COVID!)



A decade before COVID-19, H1N1 showed the potential for a novel virus to emerge and overwhelm public health systems, yet states allowed the workforce to continue shrinking.

• <https://www.governing.com/now/public-health-employee-survey-reveals-a-workforce-crisis>

US Turnover Much Higher Recently



(de Beaumont Foundation/ASTHO)

US Public Health Survey 9/2021-1/2022

• <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/2021/10/28/wisconsins-local-health-officers-have-turned-over-significantly-since-covid-began-in-march-2020/8542305002/>

WI – Especially Challenging

- Baseline funding for PH in WI is low
 - Bottom 5 of all states per-capita; \$18/person/y is *less than half* of the average for US states
- Pandemic-related exodus particularly severe
 - **“Four in 10 Wisconsin health officers have retired or resigned since the COVID-19 pandemic began”**
 - Appleton Post-Crescent headline 10/28/2021
 - *Tip of the iceberg in terms of turnover...*

Importance of Retention

- Every additional public health worker that leaves the field creates a three-fold burden:
 - yet another vacancy that needs to be filled
 - additional stress on colleagues who remain (the work doesn't go away)
 - loss of experienced workers creates a crucial "brain drain" from the field overall, a hole that brand new employees can only partially fill.

Retention Strategies

- Mentoring / coaching / peer-support
- Trauma recovery & resilience programs
 - For individuals
 - For employers
- Onboarding & Career Development support
- Scholarships / Loan repayments
- Others...

Pipeline Challenges

- The trend is for masters-level preparation to be the entry-level expectation – often an MPH, or MPH+ (dual-degree) – for ~40% of public health workers
- Some bachelors-level (~35%) or less (~25%) also possible, e.g., some nutrition & lab staff, environmental/inspectional staff, community health workers, clerical, others

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