

05-08

## STATEMENT OF POLICY

### Public Health Nurses

#### Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recognizes the importance of public health nursing and nursing leadership as a part of public health inter-professional practice. Nurses lead the nation in ratings for trust and ethics of professionals<sup>1</sup> and can be used as messengers to develop relationships and build trust with communities. The clinical expertise of nursing informs public health actions and allows nurses to act as a bridge between public health and healthcare systems. Nurses comprise more than 20% of the local public health workforce and are uniquely trained and positioned to partner across all components of the health system<sup>2,3</sup>.

NACCHO also recognizes the challenges related to recruiting and retaining qualified public health nurses while also facing limitations in funding from the federal, state, and local government. Prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, public health agencies had experienced a 36% reduction in their workforce capacity from 2008 to 2019.<sup>2</sup> The impact of the pandemic on the nursing workforce<sup>4</sup> and the public health workforce<sup>5</sup> has only made issues of recruiting and retaining nurses to local public health agencies more challenging, due to a wide variety of factors including salary constraints, shortage of available public health nurses, and competition for these individuals across multiple sectors. Additional hurdles to the local public health nursing workforce stem from a lack of preparation and training in public health principles. Only programs at the bachelor's degree typically include population health principles in the curriculum, yet 31% of LHD PHN workforces have only a diploma or associate's degree<sup>6</sup>. Improving public health expertise among local health department nursing staff has significant potential for improving public health outcomes.

NACCHO supports the following:

- Promotion of public health nursing as a professional option, not simply a component of nursing curricula; through strong partnerships between nursing programs and public health
- Integration of public health nursing rotations with governmental public health agencies, including population-based clinical experiences, into nursing school curricula;
- Creation of funding mechanisms to support capacity for practicums and internships in public health agencies;
- Facilitation of experiential and work opportunities for nursing students to gain experience in population-based settings;
- Creation and expansion of accelerated programs for current Diploma and



Associate Degree public health nurses to complete a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN),

- Recruitment of nurses at whatever degree level deemed appropriate and attainable by the LHD
- Partnerships between educational institutions and state and local public health agencies to increase the availability of free or low-cost continuing education and professional development opportunities 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;
- Creation and expansion of a loan repayment program for public health professionals, including nurses, serving in local, state, or tribal health departments;
- 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;
- Efforts to reduce the debt burden for underrepresented individuals through loan forgiveness programs and tuition reimbursement strategies;
- Support increased federal funding for traineeships that support Advanced Public Health Nursing (APHN) education;
- Increased funding opportunities for evidence-informed and outcomes research related to public health nursing practice and interventions;
- Increased funding for nursing education faculty specializing in population-based public health nursing as a strategy to increase public health prepared faculty;
- Pay parity for nurses working in governmental public health and other underserved settings.
- Nurse residency programs to help with recruitment and retention of public health nurses; including virtual residencies for communities that lack capacity to mentor new PHNs;
- Ongoing public health and public health nursing continuing education and training opportunities for nursing professionals;
- Tuition reimbursement programs to facilitate the ongoing development of nursing professionals' expertise in their field as a means of retaining and strengthening the local health department workforce;
- Opportunities for nursing students to work in public health during their nursing training either as paid staff or volunteers;
- Ensuring public health nurses are allowed to practice to full scope of their license;
- Expanding payment mechanisms to support a reimbursement structure for public health and nursing activities;
- Development of clinical ladders for nursing professionals in recognition of the promotion of advanced training and experience in line with the public health nurse competencies; and

- Partnerships between schools of nursing and public health to facilitate student clinical experiences, public health nursing staff continuing education, dual degree programs, 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 American Association of Colleges of Nursing, the Association of Community Health Nursing Educators, and the Council for Public Health Nursing Organizations, in order to enhance the visibility of public health nursing and enhance public health nursing educational opportunities for practicing nurses and students.

### **Justification**

The use of the term “nursing” to designate a position typically refers to Registered Nurses (RNs). Registered Nurses have acquired their qualifications either through an associate degree program or a 4-year degree program. They can perform assessments and physical exams, and coordinate care for complex patients. However, additional team members may also be referred to as nurses. These include: Advanced Practice Registered Nurses (APRNs), also referred to as Nurse Practitioners, who are trained at the master’s level and authorized to prescribe medication, diagnose, and treat minor illnesses and injuries; and Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs) or Licensed Vocational Nurses (LVNs), who work under the supervision of an RN, APRN or MD to provide basic care and functions such as medication administration.<sup>7</sup> The term “public health nurse(s)” in this document refers primarily to nurse(s) working as Registered Nurses.

Public health nursing is a specialty practice within nursing and public health. It focuses on improving population health by emphasizing prevention, and attending to multiple determinants of health. Often used interchangeably with community health nursing, this nursing practice includes advocacy, policy development, and planning, which addresses issues of social justice.<sup>8</sup>

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 community emergency preparedness, reduction of communicable diseases, enhanced surveillance; higher rates of breastfeeding; reductions in pre-term births and low birth weight rates and improved behavior; education; and employment. Beyond clinical nursing skills, public health nursing leadership is important for the development of policy initiatives, building systems of care and access, promoting health equity, informing public health emergency preparedness and response, and leading local public health agencies.

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 and healthy equity, addressing social determinants at the individual, population and structural level.

Nurses can play a key role in reducing and eliminating health disparities.<sup>9</sup>

- Public health nurses comprise a large percentage of the entire local health department workforce—18% of all local health department staff in 2019. Ninety-four percent of local health departments employ public health nurses.<sup>2</sup>
- 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 and difficulty in attracting candidates to geographic area.<sup>1</sup>

## **References**

1. Gallup (2022) Most Honest and Ethical Professions Poll. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/467804/nurses-retain-top-ethics-rating-below-2020-high.aspx>
2. NACCHO. (2020) NACCHO's 2019 Profile Study: Changes in Local Health Department Workforce and Finance Capacity Since 2008. Retrieved from [https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Programs/Public-Health-Infrastructure/NACCHO\\_2019\\_Profile\\_final.pdf](https://www.naccho.org/uploads/downloadable-resources/Programs/Public-Health-Infrastructure/NACCHO_2019_Profile_final.pdf) on March 3, 2023.
3. Association of Public Health Nurses. (2016) The Public Health Nurse: Necessary Partner for the Future of Healthy Communities. Retrieved from <https://www.phnurse.org/assets/APHN-PHN%20Value-Position%20Paper%205%2030%202016.pdf> on March 3, 2023.
4. Online Journal of Issues in Nursing. (2021). The Impact of COVID-19 on the Nursing Workforce: A National Overview. Retrieved from <https://ojin.nursingworld.org/MainMenuCategories/ANAMarketplace/ANAPeriodicals/OJIN/TableofContents/Vol-26-2021/No2-May-2021/The-Impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-Nursing-Workforce-A-National-Overview.html> on March 3, 2023.
5. Centers for Disease Control. (2022). Workplace perceptions and experiences related to COVID-19 response efforts among public health workers- public health workforce interests and needs survey, United States, September 2021-January 2022 <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7129a3.htm>
6. Public Health Rep. (2016). The Public Health Nurse Workforce in US State and Local Health Departments, 2012. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4716482/> on March 3, 2023.
7. American Nurses Association.(n.d.). What is Nursing? Retrieved from <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/workforce/what-is-nursing/> on March 3, 2023.
8. American Public Health Association. The Definition and Practice of Public Health Nursing. A Statement of the APHA Public Health Nursing Section, 2013. Retrieved from <https://www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/membersgroups/phn/nursingdefinition.ashx> on March 3, 2023.
9. National Academy of Sciences. (2021). The Future of Nursing 2020-2030: Chartering a Path to Achieve Health Equity. Retrieved from <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/25982/the-future-of-nursing-2020-2030-charting-a-path-to> on March 3, 2023.

## **Record of Action**

*Proposed by NACCHO Workforce Committee*

*Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors May 17, 2005*

*Updated March 2009*

*Updated November 2012*

*Updated July 2015*

*Updated July 2020*

*Updated July 2023*

*Updated February 2024*