



National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

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Understanding the Changing Public Health Landscape: Findings from the 2017 Forces of Change Survey

Washington, DC, November 7, 2017 — The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) has released its 2017 Forces of Change report, [*The Changing Public Health Landscape*](#), containing new findings on the forces that are affecting the nation's local health departments. Local health departments face both challenges and opportunities as the public health environment evolves, and the Forces of Change survey helps to identify infrastructure gaps, as well as strategies for strengthening public health capacity.

Since 2008, NACCHO has periodically surveyed local health departments to assess the impact of the economic recession. NACCHO has recently expanded the survey to address more generally the forces that affect change in local health departments, including the emergence of new infectious diseases and a growing need for collaboration across sectors. Topics for analysis in the 2017 Forces of Change focus on Budget Cuts & Job Losses; Zika Prevention and Response; Multi-Sectoral Partnerships; and Workforce Recruitment.

Although the economic situation is slowly improving for many local health departments, one in five still reported a lower budget in 2017 than in 2016. These budget

realities make it difficult for them to hire qualified staff, partially due to uncompetitive salaries. However, some are adapting to the changing economic environment by exploring new opportunities for collaboration with community partners. An additional factor influencing local health department operation includes the emergence of infectious diseases in the United States, including Zika virus disease, which compels a further focus on response and prevention activities to ensure prepared and resilient communities.

NACCHO uses these findings to raise awareness about these issues among leaders in Congress, federal agencies, and other organizations involved in decisions driving public health funding and policymaking. NACCHO distributed the Forces of Change survey to a statistically representative sample of 948 from February to April 2017. This sampling strategy allows state-level and national estimates, if sufficient response was received from a state. A total of 615 local health departments completed the survey for a response rate of 65%.

Visit www.nacchoprofilestudy.org/forces-of-change to learn how economic and political forces are changing local public health.

Highlights

Economic forces continue to affect local health departments' capacity to serve their communities. While the proportion of Local Health Departments (LHDs) reporting budget cuts and job losses has decreased in recent years, LHDs have eliminated 55,590 jobs over the past eight years. In 2016, LHDs reported an estimated 800 jobs lost; of those, 600 were due to layoffs and another 200 were due to attrition. However, this estimate is much lower than any of the reported evidence in previous years, indicating that LHD staffing levels are rebounding.

More small and medium LHDs reported job losses in 2016 than in 2015, but medium LHDs were most likely to experience job losses over the last year. Large LHDs serve nearly half the U.S. population. Fortunately, fewer large LHDs reported job losses in 2016 than 2015 (36% from 41%). Large LHDs were also least likely to report a decrease in their budgets.

Between 2008 and 2016, the total number of LHD employees decreased by 23%. In response to a shrinking workforce, public health agencies identified workforce recruitment as a priority. LHDs reported the most difficulty with hiring clinical staff, and more than half of agencies also indicated that positions providing the core public health functions —

community health workers, environmental health specialists, epidemiologists, health educators, and nutritionists — are “very” or “extremely” difficult to fill. Small LHDs were less likely to experience difficulty in filling open clinical positions compared with larger LHDs.

Nearly one-third of all LHDs anticipated budget cuts in their next fiscal year, attributed to ongoing funding shortages or a known decrease in the amount of grant funding awarded. Locally governed LHDs and LHDs with shared governance foresee the greatest impact. While 20% of these LHDs experienced budget cuts in the current fiscal year, an additional 10% are expecting lower budgets next fiscal year.

The majority of LHDs, or 78%, either engaged in or planned to engage in public health surveillance activities in response to Zika virus disease. Most LHD jurisdictions in the Southern U.S. have a mosquito species carrying the Zika virus, thus driving the need for local response. The majority of LHDs are in communities without confirmed travel-related cases of Zika; however, these cases have been reported in nearly 90% of large jurisdictions, putting those communities at substantial risk of transmitting the Zika virus. Most LHDs provide services related to public health surveillance, community education, and vector control in their jurisdictions; however, large LHDs are more likely to provide all services, compared to small and medium LHDs.

As LHDs face increasingly complex health challenges, developing multi-sectoral partnerships — with a broad range of public private, and volunteer organizations — is becoming an important strategy for improving community health. LHDs appear to be highly involved in multi-sectoral to advance specific activities; however, funding and competing priorities are a major roadblock to these partnerships. The majority of LHDs reported engaging in partnerships to address substance abuse and housing issues, but LHDs were most likely to lead or convene partnerships on preventive efforts addressing tobacco use and opioid abuse.

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About NACCHO

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) represents the nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments. These city, county, metropolitan, district, and tribal departments work every day to protect and promote health and well-being for all people in their communities. For more information about NACCHO, please visit www.naccho.org