



National Association of County & City Health Officials

The National Connection for Local Public Health

October 18, 2021

The Honorable Merrick Garland
Office of the Attorney General
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Attorney General Garland:

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), on behalf local health departments across the country, would like to thank you for your attention to the increased threats and harassment being levied at individuals working to protect their communities during the pandemic. Local health department officials and staff know the risks all too well, with documented harassment, threats, and violence impacting governmental health department staff across the country since the pandemic began. Therefore, we strongly request that you include the protection of public health department officials and staff in your directive to federal authorities to meet with local, state, Tribal, and territorial law enforcement to address the increased risk in harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence against school-related personnel.

Our nation's nearly 3,000 local health departments have been and continue to lead on the front lines of the 2019 novel coronavirus pandemic response, which has raged for over a year and a half. They provide vaccinations, testing, and contact tracing services. They monitor the health of those who may have been exposed to COVID-19 and support them to self-isolate. They use data derived from case investigations to identify trends and hot spots that inform local policies and actions related to the primary transmission routes in their communities. They employ relevant public health authorities around mask usage, indoor occupancy, and vaccinations. On top of this, they are working to keep their community members informed and answer their questions, especially considering the mis- and dis-information that has spread and divided communities.

Local health department staff live within the communities they serve and are very attune to the needs and opportunities in their area. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, local health leaders have had to make difficult choices about the health and safety of their communities, deliberating over decisions on masking, vaccinations, school and business openings and closings, as well as ensuring the quarantine or isolation of individuals who test positive for the virus. They do so despite extreme stress and strain, harassment, and increased politicization.

While the pandemic has brought greater appreciation by many to the importance of public health and the people who work in the field, too many health department leaders and their staff have experienced



threats to their jobs, their safety, and their family members. These threats have come from community members, organized (and armed) anti-government militias, and politicians.¹ As one of our members, Dr.

Jennifer McKenney stated in her testimony before Congress on September 29, 2021: “Even though the virus is the enemy, their anger and frustration are often directed toward public health officials like me.”

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These threats have taken a toll: at least 300 public health department leaders have left their posts since the pandemic began, impacting 20% of Americans.^{3 4 5} In many cases, they have been verbally abused and physically threatened.⁶ Their personal information has been shared,⁷ their families targeted,^{8 9} and their offices attacked.¹⁰ They have been politically scapegoated by some elected officials and either fired or forced to leave their positions for standing up for the health of their communities.¹¹ Of note, many of these threats have included misogynistic and racist undertones, further violating these officials.¹²

While threats to lower-level employees are harder to track, a recent study of the public health workforce by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention this past spring found that about 26% of respondents experienced stigma or discrimination because of work, 24% felt bullied, threatened, or

¹ Hu, J. “When public health becomes the public enemy.” (Sept. 24, 2021). High Country News.

<https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.10/north-extremism-when-public-health-becomes-the-public-enemy-community>

² U.S. Congress. Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Crisis. “Upgrading Public Health Infrastructure: The Need to Protect, Rebuild, And Strengthen State and Local Public Health Departments.” (Sept. 29, 2021).

³ Importantly, this does not include lower-level public health department leaders or staff.

⁴ Weber L, Barry-Jester AM. Over Half of States Have Rolled Back Public Health Powers in Pandemic. (2021) Retrieved from <https://khn.org/news/article/over-half-of-states-have-rolled-back-public-health-powers-in-pandemic/>

⁵ Baker, Mike, Ivory, Danielle. Threats, Resignations and 100 New Laws: Why Public Health Is in Crisis. (2021) Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/us/coronavirus-public-health.html>

⁶ Yeung, J., Gan, N., George, St., Wager, M., Macaya, M., and Hayes, M. (Jun 23, 2020). “June 22 coronavirus news.” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from https://www.cnn.com/world/live-news/coronavirus-pandemic-06-22-20-intl/h_ff6010939aeef7e616464caf4906a3be

⁷ Feder Ostrov, B. (Jun 16, 2020). “‘Things have gotten ugly’ - pandemic pushback drives health directors to quit.” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from calmatters.org/health/coronavirus/2020/06/public-health-officers-quitting-california-threats-coronavirus-pandemic/

⁸ Walker, H. (Sept 21, 2021). “Kent County health officer says he was threatened, nearly run off road over mask order.” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.woodtv.com/news/kent-county/kent-county-health-officer-says-he-was-threatened-nearly-run-off-road-over-mask-order/>

⁹ Hu, J. “When public health becomes the public enemy.” (Sept. 24, 2021). High Country News.

<https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.10/north-extremism-when-public-health-becomes-the-public-enemy-community>

¹⁰ Snowden, Q. (Sept 17, 2021). “Aurora man gets prison time for vandalizing Tri-County Health buildings during pandemic lockdown.” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://sentinelcolorado.com/news/metro/aurora-man-gets-prison-time-for-vandalizing-tri-county-health-buildings-during-pandemic-lockdown/>

¹¹ Vestal, C., and Ollove, M. (Jun 18, 2020). “Politicians Shunt Aside Public Health Officials” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2020/06/18/politicians-shunt-aside-public-health-officials>

¹² Deliso, M. (July 3, 2020). “‘Unsafe’: Women in public health facing pushback and threats for coronavirus response.” Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/unsafe-women-public-health-facing-pushback-threats-coronavirus/story?id=71520262>

harassed because of work, and 12% received job-related threats because of work.¹³ Health department staff experiencing these types of threats and harassment were nearly twice as likely as their peers to have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms.¹⁴

These threats and acts of violence against government workers in their professional capacity have profound impacts on these individuals and their families. Some have had to move to driving unmarked cars or adding at-home security cameras,¹⁵ others have had to rely on police escorts and round-the-clock security,¹⁶ while others changed their children's behavior worried about if they will be targeted instead.¹⁷¹⁸ While these incidents have occurred over the course of the pandemic, they have been particularly acute around school-related public health directives. For example, in August, Kent County, Michigan's health director was almost run off the road by an angry individual.¹⁹ Another received death threats.²⁰

The violence and threats faced by health department staff also directly impact care for their communities. Community meetings and hearings have been postponed or cancelled for safety reasons, delaying needed public health action and further fueling the anti-public health efforts of these groups. Many leaders have stopped attending meetings or events in person due to the security threat.²¹ But the impact goes beyond just the COVID-19 response. These health official departures come at a time when they are hardest to backfill, leaving leadership gaps in communities across the country. They take with them institutional knowledge that we will not have as we continue to fight the pandemic or face the

¹³ Bryant-Genevier J, Rao CY, Lopes-Cardozo B, et al. Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidal Ideation Among State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Public Health Workers During the COVID19 Pandemic — United States, March–April 2021. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2021;70:947–952. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7026e1>

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Deliso, M. (July 3, 2020). "'Unsafe': Women in public health facing pushback and threats for coronavirus response." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/unsafe-women-public-health-facing-pushback-threats-coronavirus/story?id=71520262>

¹⁶ Salonga, R. (Nov 6, 2020). "Boogaloo-linked Gilroy man headed to trial over threats to Santa Clara County health officer." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/11/06/boogaloo-linked-gilroy-man-headed-to-trial-over-threats-to-santa-clara-county-health-officer/>

¹⁷ Associated Press. (Oct 30, 2020). "County health officials quitting amid threats, harassment." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://apnews.com/article/lifestyle-virus-outbreak-public-health-walking-michael-brown-17222cdb42ce90365c21e9aa889451ab>

¹⁸ Hu, J. "When public health becomes the public enemy." (Sept. 24, 2021). High Country News. <https://www.hcn.org/issues/53.10/north-extremism-when-public-health-becomes-the-public-enemy-community>

¹⁹ Walker, H. (Sept 21, 2021). "Kent County health officer says he was threatened, nearly run off road over mask order." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.woodtv.com/news/kent-county/kent-county-health-officer-says-he-was-threatened-nearly-run-off-road-over-mask-order/>

²⁰ ABC12 News Staff. (Oct 7, 2021). "Woman accused of threatening Genesee County Health Department sent to trial." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.abc12.com/2021/10/07/woman-accused-threatening-genesee-county-health-department-sent-trial/>

²¹ Walker, H. (Sept 21, 2021). "Kent County health officer says he was threatened, nearly run off road over mask order." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.woodtv.com/news/kent-county/kent-county-health-officer-says-he-was-threatened-nearly-run-off-road-over-mask-order/>

next crisis. Moreover, the threats and violence keep new top talent from working in governmental public health, which makes it difficult to recruit, retain, and grow the leaders of tomorrow.

While law enforcement has stepped up to protect health department staff in some instances,²² far too often very little is done to stop or prosecute these actions.²³ They need help. Your announced efforts to improve the protection of school-related personnel is desperately needed for our nation's public health staff, as well. Therefore, we respectfully request that you include the protection of public health department leaders and staff in your October 4, 2021, directive to meet with and open dedicated lines of communication between federal, state, Tribal, territorial, and local law enforcement "to improve threat reporting, assessment and response by law enforcement."²⁴

Thank you for your attention to these critical issues that have had a major impact on local public health and the COVID-19 response. NACCHO and public health professionals stand ready to work with you to protect and support public health department leaders and staff as they work to keep us all safe.

Sincerely,



Lori Tremmel Freeman, MBA
Chief Executive Officer

CC: President Joseph Biden
Secretary Xavier Becerra
Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas
Director Rochelle Walensky

²² Glover, J. and Morris, A. (Sept 1, 2020). "Gilroy man arrested for allegedly sending violent threats to Santa Clara County health officer." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://abc7news.com/boogaloo-santa-clara-county-threats-dr-sara-cody-coronavirus/6398738/>

²³ Perkins, W. (Oct 11, 2021). "Health director files complaint with attorney general following mask-related hostilities." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.petoskeynews.com/story/news/2021/10/11/northwest-michigan-health-director-raises-legal-concerns-amid-mask-conflict/6087738001/>

²⁴ Department of Justice. (Oct 4, 2021). "Justice Department Addresses Violent Threats Against School Officials and Teachers." Retrieved October 14, 2021, from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-addresses-violent-threats-against-school-officials-and-teachers>