

# Telling Missouri's Public Health Stories



## Greener Pastures

The public health workforce is shrinking. That's according to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) who say the ratio of public health workers to U.S. population dropped by 28% from 220 per 100,000 persons in 1980 to 158 per 100,000 in 2000.<sup>1</sup> State and local public health agencies in Missouri employ approximately 4,200 full time equivalent public health workers, a ratio of just 68 workers per 100,000 Missouri residents.

Local public health administrators say staff shortages pose a major challenge – one they hope will be addressed by the #HealthierMO grassroots initiative to transform the public health system in Missouri. During meetings in November 2018, administrators listed several anticipated benefits of public health system transformation, including “job descriptions across the board,” “workforce development and training” and the “ability to recruit and keep well-qualified employees.”

A 2017 survey of recent masters of public health (MPH) program graduates in Missouri highlights the recruiting challenge.<sup>2</sup> The survey was conducted by the Missouri Public Health Association (MPHA). Only one in three students surveyed said they would pursue governmental public health work. Nearly half stated they would seek non-governmental public health jobs. Most of the students said they would prefer to leave Missouri and work in academia. They said lower starting salaries, limited career laddering and the work environment are major barriers to working in Missouri's public health system. The majority of survey participants were 25-30 years old.

As Missouri's experienced public health workforce moves toward retirement, recruiting qualified replacements will become vital.

### Recruiting Young Professionals

National data show nearly one in four governmental public health workers intend to leave the field before 2020.<sup>3</sup> The institutional knowledge and experience of seasoned professionals will be difficult to replace, but new graduates and young professionals may offer an important key to developing a stronger public health workforce in Missouri.

The Pew Research Center defines millennials as those born between 1981 – 1996. These young professionals say the stereotype that they are entitled, disengaged and dependent on technology is off-base. They argue millennials are passionate about causes and communities, and that the field of public health appeals to their systems thinking and problem-solving skills. Many of them want to do meaningful work and are eager to learn and improve.<sup>4</sup>

The generation that follows them may be even more engaged. National experts say Generation Z, or youth born after 1995, has emerged as a generation demanding a more fair, better and safer nation for everyone.

Truman State University professor Dr. Carol Cox says young professionals have a great deal to offer the public health system in Missouri.

“Young professionals graduating from our Missouri universities with their community/public health degree and their Certified Health Education Specialist (CHES) credential can ‘hit the ground running’ as they assist individuals and communities to make informed decisions on matters affecting health. They can assess, plan, implement, and evaluate individual and population-based disease prevention and health promotion programs, administer and manage fiscal and other resources for programs/interventions, advocate for supportive policies to enhance health promotion projects, and serve as a resource to assist community members in achieving healthy lifestyles.”

Three young professionals have ‘hit the ground running’ with active roles in the #HealthierMO public health transformation initiative.

Audrey Huiying Bian provided research support to the communications team, and Ray Dlugolecki and Michelle McDowell currently serve on the initiative’s Communications Committee. McDowell recently worked with Dr. Cox to develop an online learning module describing Missouri’s public health system and ongoing transformation efforts. She works full time at the University of Missouri on biomedical research that can be applied to improving health outcomes. Dlugolecki is the Community Health Promotion Division Manager for the Jackson County Health Department in Independence, Missouri. Bian is pursuing graduate studies in Public Administration and Public Health at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri.



Audrey Huiying Bian

“A well-prepared and trained public health workforce is the foundation of a healthy community,” says Dlugolecki. “We know this. We also know that a large chunk of our workforce is moving to a well-earned retirement, and as a result we MUST ensure that systems are in place for a logical pipeline of talent to replace them.”

### **Credentialing Programs**

One key to developing a successful recruiting pipeline includes ensuring quality credentialing programs, according to Cox.

“Certification attests to knowledge and skills, recognizes professional competency, demonstrates commitment to the profession and to continuing education in the profession, and can assist in career advancement,” she says.

Dennis Diehl, Executive Director of the Missouri Institute for Community Health (MICH), supports ensuring a strong workforce through the use of core competencies and training programs. MICH includes these concepts in their newly revised voluntary state public health accreditation standards.

“Our new accreditation standards no longer require specific degrees for some positions,” says Diehl, “however, the standards do require an agency to have a strong workforce development plan that emphasizes core competencies for public health activities, along with specific training in health equity and leadership for all staff throughout the health department. We are confident this will create a stronger, higher quality public health workforce for Missouri, while allowing health departments the flexibility to hire the staff they require.”

Cox adds her perspective on credentialing through the lens of national accreditation. “There is an association between Public Health Accreditation Board Domains and Certified Education Specialist Responsibilities/Competencies. As Certified Health Education Specialists (CHES) can conduct community needs/health assessments, implement and evaluate population health interventions, and influence health policy; they can be called on to assist with these initiatives.”

### **Job Satisfaction**

Cox adds that knowledge, skills, competencies and commitment gained through certification may lead to career advancement, professional recognition/support and job satisfaction. And job satisfaction, according to ASTHO, means people will be more likely to continue working in public health.

“Studies demonstrate public health workers who are more satisfied with their work environment, perceive it as supportive, and are more involved in their careers are less likely to consider leaving the field,” says Cox.

McDowell suggests one way to improve job satisfaction might be allowing flexible scheduling.

“Evidence suggests that increasing flexible work arrangements, flex time, self-scheduled shifts, or compressed work weeks improves employee retention. With the current system, it is a challenge to address the less than competitive salaries and poor benefits or pensions; however, offering flexibility will improve the overall picture.”

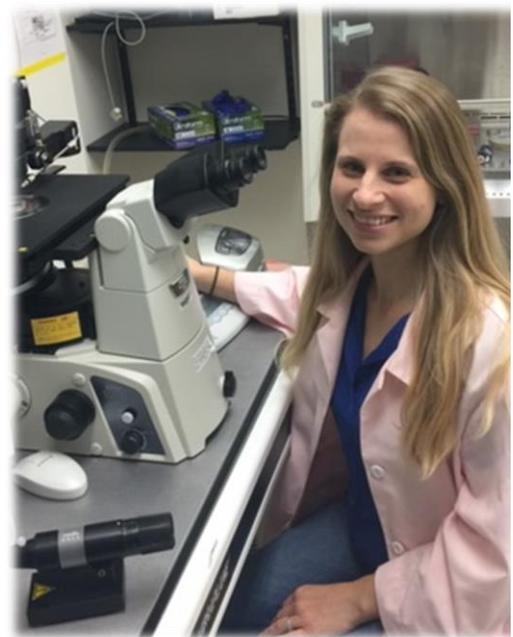
### **Higher Salaries**

Competitive salaries are vital to enticing young professionals into public health, according to new MPH graduates. In fact, in the 2017 MPHA survey, recent MPH graduates said lower starting salaries were the top reason they would not pursue governmental public health jobs in Missouri. The survey warns “if Missouri’s public health field cannot remain competitive in job recruitment, obtaining and maintaining a highly trained public health workforce will continue to be a challenge.”

Dlugolecki agrees, urging public health system partners to address recruiting with “the same level of vigor and tenacity that we give to other public health challenges.” He says public health system leaders must move out of the shadows, take advantage of dynamic opportunities, and work to develop future leaders.

As she looks for an entry point into the workforce, Bian says she hopes the #HealthierMO initiative’s transformation work will result in higher salaries and better benefits for public health workers.

Public health workers also deserve recognition, adds McDowell. “It is unfortunate that our unsung heroes are turning in their day jobs for greener pastures. I would say it is time to return the favor and implement evidence-based interventions to retain employees so that we have public health professionals to carry us through to the next century and continue improving health outcomes.”



Michelle McDowell

Public health professionals Dlugolecki, McDowell and Bian have the enthusiasm, passion and innovative thinking to do just that. Each of them is actively working to transform the public health system in Missouri. Together they are the future of Missouri's public health workforce. They are the promise of a #HealthierMO!

Sources:

<sup>1</sup>Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey. Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO). 2014. Retrieved from infographic summary at <http://www.astho.org/Research/Workforce-Research/PH-WINS-Infographic-Image/>. Full article at <https://journals.lww.com/jphmp/toc/2015/11001>.

<sup>2</sup>Malone, B., Groenweghe, E., Chundru, S., Rallabandi, L, Mopala, Y.R. Missouri Public Health Work Force Survey of Recent MPH Graduates: Barriers Faced to Employment in Governmental Public Health Service, 2017.

<sup>3</sup>Sellers, K., Leider, J.P., Harper, E., Castrucci, B.C., Bharthapudi, K., Liss-Levinson, R., Jarris, P.E., Hunder, E.L. The Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey: the first national survey of state health agency employees. J Public Health Manag Pract. 2015;21(suppl 6):S13–S27.

<sup>4</sup>New Voices: Millennials and the Future of Public Health. De Beaumont Foundation. October 11, 2018. Retrieved from <http://www.debeaumont.org/new-voices-millennials-and-the-future-of-public-health/?platform=hootsuite>

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The #HealthierMO initiative seeks more stories like this one that demonstrate how partners in Missouri's greater public health system are working together to transform the future of public health in our state and offer every resident the opportunity for a healthier life. If you have a story to share, email Communications Coordinator Jaci McReynolds at [jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org](mailto:jmcreynolds@healthiermo.org). Learn more about the initiative and how you can get involved at [HealthierMO.org](http://HealthierMO.org), on Facebook @[HealthierMO](https://www.facebook.com/HealthierMO), or on Twitter @[aHealthierMO](https://twitter.com/aHealthierMO).