

# Local Health Department Workforce Recruitment and Retention: Challenges and Opportunities

## A Practitioner Briefing

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### Executive Summary

Local health departments face significant challenges as they carry out their missions of promoting the health and well-being of residents in the communities they serve. With demands for public health services on the rise, health departments are operating in an environment of tight revenues (CMS National Health Expenditure Accounts, 2013), reduced intergovernmental transfers, and an aging workforce. How health officials handle recruitment and retention against the backdrop of constrained resources will directly affect how well they provide vital public health services to individuals and communities across the country.

Between 2004 and 2010, the local health workforce experienced changes in size and composition. The most rapid decline in the size of the workforce occurred between 2008 and 2010. Health departments serving populations between 50,000 and one million and state-wide health departments faced the most severe reductions, while health departments serving populations under 49,999 and greater than one million expanded the size of their workforces between 2005 and 2010, according to the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). More generally, in the 2004–2010 period, healthcare practitioner and technical occupations remained flat in number and support occupations dropped by about 15 percent, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

This report examines workforce recruitment and retention challenges and opportunities in local health departments. It draws on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), and a 2012 original survey of health departments on recruitment and retention policies and programs. In addition, it provides case studies of local health departments that have been successful in recruiting and retaining the talent they need to carry out their public health mission.

Findings from the survey indicate that health department leadership is concerned about recruiting and retaining well-qualified employees and keeping

currently funded positions. Survey respondents identified specific challenges to retaining well-qualified employees such as human resources rules and procedures and lack of opportunities for advancement. Recruitment strategies used by health departments tend to be somewhat limited, with smaller departments using fewer approaches. In addition, few health departments that responded to the survey use formal succession planning for managing talent and ensuring that they can fulfill their missions despite leadership and staff turnover. The majority of health departments rely on informal succession planning.

Six case studies examine approaches taken by health departments of various sizes, in different regions, and serving populations with a range of demographics to address recruitment, retention, and succession planning. Promising practices cited in several case studies include:

- Recognizing employee contributions through both non-monetary and monetary rewards
- Providing opportunities for leadership and professional development, flexibility, and autonomy as a way to motivate and retain employees
- Hiring leaders who model strong leadership and inspire employees
- Employing formal and systematic succession planning to retain knowledge and expertise
- Pursuing grants to supplement department resources
- Promoting public service and public health as a desirable career choice
- Investing in organizational and leadership development
- Planning early for future workforce needs
- Investing in and developing talent from all parts of the organization and from schools of public health and nursing as a recruitment and retention tool.

The lessons learned from these cases provide a starting point for other local health departments to improve their ability to recruit and retain skilled employees.