Public health practitioners never stop learning on the job, whether mastering project management, brushing up on policy and law, or understanding the sociohistorical implications of community health initiatives.

In responding to COVID-19, public health practitioners were forced into a reactive mode, working nonstop to curb the spread of illness. But emerging from the crisis and with increased support at federal, state, and local levels, health departments have an opportunity to shift their focus to capacity building—and that begins with a thriving workforce.

By investing in professional development for employees, agencies can leverage the current spotlight on public health to attract new professionals as well as create incentives to retain members of the workforce.

Today’s Investments, Tomorrow’s Gains
Promoting professional development through online learning modules, conferences, or fellowships demonstrates that an organization values its employees. Within reason, employees should be building the skills they want to grow in their careers that are relevant to their current roles. When people are supported in developing their skills, they are more inclined to stay at their agencies and do their best work.

All staff members can benefit from continuing training and education, no matter their career stage. Employees who are recent graduates or otherwise new to the workforce need a clearly defined framework to outline the skills they need for career success. And as governmental public health departments contend with a projected workforce exodus, investing in professional development is a key component in strengthening the public health workforce.

Identify gaps and interests
To ensure that professional development opportunities are appropriate for their employees, agency leaders first need to identify the needs and interests among their staff. Ask employees where they want to build their competencies, considering the skills they need for success. When people are supported in developing their skills, they are more inclined to stay at their agencies and do their best work.

Use existing resources
Although health departments should be thoughtful in their organization-wide strategy to implement professional development, leaders need not reinvent the wheel when so many resources tailored to public health professionals are readily available.

The Public Health Learning Navigator within the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Training (NCCPHT) is a collection of trainings that have been curated on the basis of quality standards for online, on-demand learning. Most of the trainings also come at no cost to learners and have been produced by leaders in training development, like the Regional Public Health Training Centers. The National Coordinating Center for Public Health Training can work with leaders of agencies and partners across sectors to curate training specific to employees and develop training plans to help them meet their goals.
Incorporate learning into the organization

Embedding professional development into the existing structure of an organization not only signals to employees that their workplace values their growth but also makes it more likely that people will take advantage of these opportunities.

Build in time for employees to participate in coaching, workshops, competency-based trainings, and other forms of professional development, depending on what employees have expressed interest in exploring. These events can take place during slower periods of work or a dedicated block of time every month.

Some teams may also want to participate in training together, working on skills they want to collectively develop. Or employees with expertise in a given area can cross-train their colleagues as part of an agency’s professional development efforts.

Furthermore, consider professional development and capacity building in budget narratives and work plans where appropriate. Agencies should connect these goals to programs such as public health accreditation.

Encourage uptake of new skills for emerging issues

There is more to continuing education and professional development beyond the skills that are typically deemed foundational to public health. When executing training plans, think about the competencies that are too often dismissed.

This generation of practitioners is seeing this convergence among health equity, social justice, law, and public health principles like never before. Being able to apply health and racial equity principles within and outside organizations is critical to public health practice. Reducing health inequities will require the field to have a better understanding of how to infuse equity into all facets of this work.

Consider the interpersonal and relationship-building skills such as communication and advocacy that make for well-rounded public health practitioners. Practitioners must be able to communicate the value of public health in ways that are relatable and nonpartisan to reach all communities.

With more people from diverse backgrounds entering the field of public health, the options for professional development should reflect their needs. Public health agencies comprise individuals with unique interests, career pathways, and talents they bring to the field, all of which can be supported through professional development opportunities. Making professional development a priority shows staff that their agencies want them to stay for a long time and continue to grow throughout their tenure.

For More Information

The National Network of Public Health Institutes through the NCCPHT has various resources for public health agencies and other health system partners in professional development. Learn more about NNPHI, its network of public health institutes, and the professional development offerings of the NCCPHT:

- National Network of Public Health Institutes: https://nnphi.org
- National Coordinating Center for Public Health Training: https://nnphi.org/member/national-coordinating-center-for-public-health-training
- Public Health Learning Navigator: https://www.phlearningnavigator.org

Reference