

Guest Editors' Message: Hawai'i's Public Health Workforce

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Dear Readers,

This Special Issue on the public health workforce (PHW) in Hawai'i was envisioned as a consolidated, scholarly resource to support, enrich, and grow the PHW in the state of Hawai'i. It was conceived in response to the extraordinary efforts, the deep value, and the capacity strains of the PHW during the COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunities that arose following this moment to augment, develop, and grow this workforce to reflect our communities and their needs.¹

As this Special Issue goes to publication, the landscape for public health has dramatically changed and will continue to change.²⁻⁹ The mission of public health is currently under threat in myriad ways in the state and in the country, from misinformation, to science denial, to data suppression, to reduction in funding and personnel and programs to essential public health activities.¹⁰⁻¹³ Governmental public health locally, nationally, and globally is in crisis.^{14,15} As the federal government plays a core role in non-governmental public health training, research, data, and organizational support, these entities are also under threat.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ There has been a recent sea change on the foundation of which government public health has been built over the last century.¹⁹ This is in a landscape in which public trust in public health institutions and science was already falling; the lack of trust especially in the face of misinformation is a dire situation that needs to be changed, as is the dismantling of the core expertise in the institutions that provide this guidance.²⁰ Much of our public health training has focused on preventing disease—not on confronting misinformation, information suppression, or cuts to the public health workforce—yet these have become critical threats to our mission.

The multiple authors of this editorial recognize the information collected in the Special Issue at this moment may feel more historical than timely. While times have changed, this Special Issue is being shared as a reminder of the evergreen value of the mission of public health and the continued need to support, grow, and recognize the PHW and to achieve health equity. The information in this Special Issue is important to capture now to document and understand these conversations, initiatives, and values as well as the collaborative efforts of so many over time. The ed-

itorial board hopes this document may serve as a useful scholarly resource to both current and future endeavors to augment, support, and rebuild the PHW. These efforts may include bringing back those who have gone to the private sector or left the field entirely and rebuilding pathways to engage them. It may include sharing the value and meaning of public health with new audiences and new settings.

The current threats to public health do not change the core essential role of public health in all of our lives and our communities. A healthy public health workforce is vital for a healthy economy. Each one of us depends every day on the work of public health to ensure safe air to breathe, safe water to drink, safe food to eat, and safe places for recreation. We depend on public health to make it safe for us to interact with each other at work, at school, socially, and in public places. Without a strong public health infrastructure, the risk of engaging in all of these activities will inevitably increase. This Special Issue can now serve, in part, as a roadmap for strengthening and rebuilding these critical public health functions in the face of current threats. To this goal, as in so much of public health, the editorial board will continue to work together with dedication, commitment, and collaboration towards collective goals for community health and wellbeing across our sectors and roles. And will continue to build and support the workforce that makes this possible in this moment of uncertainty – and beyond.

These are personal views and they do not necessarily represent Hawai'i Department of Health, the University of Hawai'i, or other institutions of employment.

On March 4, 2025, the Office of Public Health Studies (OPHS) in the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa was renamed the Department of Public Health Sciences to better identify as an academic department and to emphasize leadership in advancing the science of public health in Hawai'i and beyond. Most articles for this Special Issue were already completed and do not reflect this name change. The article focused on the department as well as author affiliations in the editorials have been updated to reflect this change.

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