

Issue Overview: Public Health Workforce Development in Hawai'i: Building a Post Pandemic Future to Achieve Health Equity

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Abbreviations

CDPHPD = Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Division

DOH = Department of Health

DPHS = Department of Public Health Sciences

EH = environmental health

HIPHI = Hawai'i Public Health Institute

PHW = public health workforce

UH = University of Hawai'i

Column

This Special Issue – *Public Health Workforce Development in Hawai'i: Building a Post Pandemic Future to Achieve Health Equity* – was envisioned as a collaborative resource including actionable evidence for the public health workforce (PHW) in Hawai'i now and in the future. It was designed to build and support efforts to support, grow, and nurture this workforce following the capacity strain during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this Special Issue was in development, the state of Hawai'i also experienced other devastating crises, including the Maui wildfires, with public health impacts in both the short and long term. Today is a moment of new crisis for public health for the state, nation, and the world.¹⁻³ While this Special Issue was developed in another time and political environment, the authors believe the effort to build a robust PHW that supports health and health equity for our communities remains essential.

The PHW in the state of Hawai'i is vital to the state's collective health and wellbeing. This workforce is also under strain.⁴ In a recent hearing, the Hawai'i State Department of Health (DOH) Director shared that 43% of DOH employees (compared to 36% of other state employees) said they were very or somewhat likely to make a genuine effort to find a new job with another employer within the next 12 months.⁴ Work was the second leading significant source of stress for DOH employees compared to third for other state employees.⁴ In spring of 2024, over a quarter (27%) of DOH employees reported 14+ days in the past month when their mental health was not good.⁵⁻⁷ Thirty percent of DOH employees said more staffing and resources would help address their challenges.⁴

Public health nationally has been chronically underfunded with public health and prevention accounting for less than 5% of the health spending and often a target for cuts.⁸ Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 5.4% of \$4.1 trillion of national health spending in 2020 went to-

wards public health and prevention.⁹ At the moment of this writing, public health is under considerable threat directly and indirectly in ways that are almost unfathomably broad. The impacts of this will have consequences that are heart-breakingly specific and deeply local as well as global, with impacts that will likely ripple beyond the lifetimes of those alive today.¹⁰⁻¹²

This Special Issue began as a collaborative visioning and set of resources for building a post-pandemic future to achieve health equity. This Special Issue is the product of a collaboration with the editorial board, authors, and reviewers who have brought incredible expertise across diverse areas of public health practice and engagement during the long process it took to bring this Special Issue to print amidst so many other responsibilities and activities in public health.

As Guest Editors, we especially want to acknowledge the wonderful editorial board (listed in detail below) who supported this process with their expertise and insights. We also are grateful to the peer reviewers, the journal, and all the authors for their time, wisdom, hard work, and patience. Articles in this Special Issue range across many areas, describing the PHW and related professions in the state along with challenges and opportunities. This issue also provides frameworks, examples, data, and strategic ideas to support research on, practice in, and advocacy for the Hawai'i PHW in the future.

The 3 columns and 7 articles in this Special Issue highlight areas across the scope of the needs for this interdisciplinary workforce in Hawai'i along with innovative potential future directions to address these needs. Health equity is woven across these goals, now and in the future. Following the 10 Essential Public Health Services model,¹³ equity is central to the fundamental goals of the articles as a bridge between challenges and solutions.¹⁴ As the non-partisan, non-profit American Public Health Association (APHA) that represents more than 23 000 individual members, who reside in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico recently stated as a plaintiff in a lawsuit to combat the indiscriminate ending of federal funds, "working to achieve equity in health status is essential not only to APHA's own mission but to the discipline of public health itself."¹⁵

Editorial

The special edition begins with a letter from the editors addressing the moment in which we find ourselves publishing this Special Issue. It is followed by a column by Scott Mu-

rakami, the Public Health Infrastructure Grant director at the State of Hawai'i DOH, on the value of this workforce. As he states, coming into this role at the DOH: "has nurtured a deeper appreciation for the efforts that it takes to sustain our island way of life today and into the future, a future that ensures we all thrive together as a community."¹⁶

Gaps and Challenges

The first set of articles calls attention to PHW gaps and challenges. **Quantifying the Public Health Workforce for Hawai'i: Current Data, Measurement Complexities, and Conceptual Frameworks for Next Steps** by Sentell et al,¹⁷ gives an overview of ways to quantify existing needs in this workforce. As the PHW is interdisciplinary by nature, it can be challenging to identify the full scope of needs, and there may not be full agreement on the boundaries of what types of jobs to count and which data to include in considering this workforce. This article considers that complexity and gives data that can be useful to policymakers in addressing gaps from a variety of perspectives with room for future funding in this area.¹⁷ The authors conclude: "The public health workforce [PHW] is vital to community well-being. PHW enumeration is not only an academic exercise – it is a practical necessity for ensuring Hawai'i has a robust PHW."¹⁷

The next article describes the environmental PHW needs in Hawai'i. **The Environmental Health Workforce in Hawai'i: Current Status and Recommendations for Improvement** by Weldon & Pirkle¹⁸ considers environmental health (EH) issues and priorities in Hawai'i and how to strengthen the EH workforce and infrastructure in EH, areas of high interest to communities and students. These are critical topics that reach across many systems of care and needs across the state. To address these issues, the authors state: "Various discipline and skill levels are needed to supply the environmental health [EH] workforce, but students may not be aware of EH career paths. Internships and traineeships are needed to introduce students to EH and prepare the future EH workforce."¹⁸

Strategies for Building a Dementia-Capable Workforce in Hawai'i by Nishita & Kawamoto¹⁹ considers the needs of *kūpuna* (elders) and links with dementia caregiving and workforce capacity. They share insights regarding this work and conclude: "Funding dementia care and the building of a dementia-capable workforce is a challenge that must likewise be approached from multiple angles involving both public and private funding sources and new and existing programs."¹⁹

Social Work Workforce, Licensing and Hawai'i: An Overview by Arndt et al²⁰ from the Department of Social Work at the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at University of Hawai'i considers the workforce needed to address the behavioral health needs that have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and other developments. The authors share: "Social workers engage in prevention and intervention work, contributing to public health through advocacy, disaster response, grief counseling, and health promotion efforts. Additionally, so-

cial workers respond to health equity issues by advocating for policy changes to improve health care access, including issues related to reproductive rights, advanced-care planning, and behavioral health parity. These activities support public health generally and are often part of public health programs in a variety of settings."²⁰

Innovative Solutions

The second half of this issue highlights some innovative efforts to address these gaps and challenges. **Assuring the "Public" in "Public Health": Developing Workforce Capacity, Diversity, and Connectedness at the Department of Public Health Sciences** by Sugimoto-Matsuda et al²¹ describes the work of the Department of Public Health Sciences (DPHS), formerly the Office of Public Health Studies, in the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health,²² including current strategic goals. Authors share: "Public health's unique approach to population health, combined with its aspirational yet critical goal of health equity and social justice, requires a robust workforce grounded in both technical skills and dedication to community. DPHS leverages its unique position as an academic unit which centers around students and community, to conduct teaching, research, and service that flexes to workforce and public needs."

An Evaluation of the Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Health Summer Health Academy by Antonio et al²³ describes the Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Health (NHIH) Summer Health Academy program, a DPHS Strategic Initiative through the flagship NHIH program that aims to increase the number of underrepresented and disadvantaged students who join and are prepared to join public health. This program will successfully contribute to diversity in the PHW from a strengths-based approach by considering Indigenous knowledge, building capacity, and experience among students from Hawai'i and the Pacific. As the authors remind us: "Indigenous ways of knowing center on balance and holism, with an emphasis of learning through ancestral and intergenerational knowledge, which continue to be revitalized as a demonstration of the ongoing resilience of Indigenous Peoples."²³

Building the Future of Public Health Workforce: Comprehensive Intern Training at Hawai'i Public Health Institute by Kuhaulua & Yamauchi²⁴ provides ideas regarding practical pipelines and training programs from the Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI), a statewide nonprofit organization that is the first and only public health institute serving Hawai'i.²⁵ Their work includes food and agriculture, transportation and public safety, oral health, healthy eating + active living (HEAL), drug and alcohol prevention, tobacco, COVID-19 response efforts, and workforce development with a goal to shift public health goals from focusing primarily on treating disease to the promotion of preventing it. These authors share: "A holistic strategy involving stakeholder collaboration, leadership development, evaluation, and ongoing workforce assessment is essential for developing a robust PHW capable

of promoting health, preventing disease, reducing mortality, and responding effectively to future crises.”²⁴

Conclusions

Taken together and individually, the articles in this Special Issue can be a resource for information to continue to support, grow, and advocate for this vital workforce in our state in this time and in the future. This Special Issue can also provide ideas, discussions, and considerations for the future to address the diverse array of public health challenges that confront this workforce — from the importance of addressing infectious diseases and attacks on core public health values on issues such as loneliness, tobacco, water quality, misinformation, and climate change^{26,27} to the promise and challenges of artificial intelligence and new data science tools within aging infrastructure.

Public health is often working best when it is invisible, highlighting prevention and collective well-being over time. This can also hide underinvestment in this workforce — until it is too late. Innovative conversations are happening about the future of the public health system and the PHW nationally. Hawai‘i has been innovative in many ways and should remain at the forefront in this moment of crisis and complexity and beyond.

This edition shares the critical work being done by so many, including the authors, to expand and strengthen Hawai‘i’s PHW, with special attention to addressing community needs, long-term impact, collaboration, strengths-based approaches, and interprofessional teamwork. These manuscripts inspire practitioners, researchers, and advocates to continue this work for better health in Hawai‘i, the Pacific, and the world.

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Editorial Board

May Rose Dela Cruz

May Rose Dela Cruz, DrPH has current positions at the HIPHI as the Director of Community Health Research and at the UH DPHS as an Associate Researcher. Her previous roles involved the creation of cancer prevention health materials for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos in Hawai‘i and advocating for vaccine preventable cancers policies and research. Dr. Dela Cruz’s current research and interests involve tobacco prevention and cessation, engaging community involvement in research prioritization, improving health outcomes for Filipinos and providing public health outreach to Hawai‘i’s most vulnerable communities.

Donna-Marie Palakiko

Donna-Marie Palakiko, PhD, RN, APRN, is *kanaka ‘ōiwi wahine* (Native Hawaiian woman) from the island of O‘ahu. She is a mother, leader, educator, and nurse researcher with a focus on Indigenous health and workforce development to address Indigenous health disparities using a cultural safety framework. She has over 20 years of experience in community-based research, executive leadership, and finding talent to address workforce needs with Native Hawaiian serving institutions. She is a Fulbright Scholar alumnus and holds executive leadership positions on the American Indian Alaska Native Native Hawaiian Caucus of the American Public Health Association, American Indian Cancer Foundation, the incoming President for the Damien and Marianne Catholic Conference, and a member on other organizational nonprofit boards and advisory councils.

Jessica Yamauchi

Jessica Yamauchi, MA, EMBA is the Chief Executive Officer of the HIPHI. During her tenure, Jessica has worked to pass several health policies, including raising the age of sale of tobacco products to 21, including electronic smoking devices in Hawai‘i’s state smoke-free air law, healthy by default beverages for kids’ meals, and securing funding for a pilot double up bucks program (increasing fresh local produce for SNAP recipients). Under her leadership, HIPHI worked to respond to COVID-19 providing up to date information to partners and advocates, support community health workers, and provide internship opportunities. Jessica currently serves on the National Network of Public Health Institutes Board of Directors, ex-officio board member of the Hawai‘i Public Health Association (HPHA), serves on the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health Dean’s Advisory Council, and School of Communication & Information Community Advisory Board Committee.

Laura Reichhardt

Laura Reichhardt, MS, AGPCNP-BC, FAAN is certified as an Adult Gerontology Primary Care Nurse Practitioner with a background in public health. Her work as the Director of the Hawai‘i State Center for Nursing focuses on state health and nursing policy and planning, workforce recruitment and retention, and statewide strategy. She serves on several boards including the Arcadia Family of Companies and the Hawai‘i Department of Labor and Industrial Relations Healthcare Workforce Advisory Board, and is an active member of the National Forum of State Nursing Workforce Centers and the American Academy of Nursing. Laura was recognized for her advocacy work locally by the Healthcare Association of Hawai‘i, American Association of Nurse Practitioners, and nationally by the Daisy Foundation.

Camonia Graham-Tutt

Camonia R. Graham-Tutt, PhD, MS Ed, CHES is currently an Associate Professor of Community Health at the University of Hawai‘i-West O‘ahu. “Dr. C”, as she is affectionately known by her students, is a behavioral health organizer/

researcher, dedicated to understanding and communicating health prevention efforts for all populations. She has a relentless passion for ground-breaking education strategies that assist vulnerable communities. Dr. C has served as board President for the Hawai'i Public Health Association (HPHA), Chair for the Hawai'i State West O'ahu Planning Committee, and board member of the HIPHI.

Janet M. Berreman

Janet Berreman, MD, MPH is the Kaua'i District Health Officer for the Hawai'i DOH. She practiced pediatrics in American Samoa before joining the Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center. After more than 15 years of clinical practice serving primarily Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian communities, Dr. Berreman transitioned into public health. She served as the City of Berkeley's Health Officer for 10 years before returning to Hawai'i in 2017. Teaching has been an integral part of Dr. Berreman's career, both in clinical pediatrics and in public health. Issues of health equity and the impacts of systemic racism on health are core to Dr. Berreman's work. Her current position brings together Dr. Berreman's experiences in rural Pacific Island primary care and local public health, and her commitment to equity and workforce development.

Lance Ching

Lance Ching, PhD, MPH received his doctorate in Pathobiology from the University of Washington School of Public Health, and MPH in epidemiology from Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. He has more than 10 years of experience developing and testing next generation vaccines against the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* (Mtb), and influenza. Before joining the Hawai'i DOH as its lead chronic disease epidemiologist, he served as an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's Arctic Investigations Program in Anchorage, Alaska, where he examined the association between Hepatitis B Virus (HBV) genotypes and the development of hepatocellular carcinoma among Alaska Native people. In his current appointment, he provides technical and epidemiological support to diverse programs in the DOH's Chronic Disease Prevention & Health Promotion Division (CDPHPD). Dr. Ching's efforts are focused primarily on policy, systems, and environmental change in various settings (ie, schools, communities, work-sites, health care) and at all levels of government. He has co-authored numerous peer-reviewed publications and currently serves as an Associate Editor for the *Hawai'i Journal of Health & Social Welfare*.

Kelley Withy

Kelley Withy, MD, PhD, is Professor of Family Medicine and Community Health at UH John A. Burns School of Medicine and the Director of the Hawai'i/Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center (AHEC). Her research focuses on health workforce assessment, health careers development, rural health, telehealth and substance use prevention. Dr.

Withy has over 100 presentations, publications and funded grants for projects on predoctoral training, rural health disparities, health careers recruitment, provider retention, cultural factors in medicine, distance learning methods, telehealth, opioid prevention and treatment and community health education. Dr. Withy is the primary physician workforce researcher in Hawai'i and has developed the only statewide database of supply and demand for physician services as well as a statewide telehealth network called Hawai'i UTelehealth. She has designed training programs around health workforce pathways for all years of schooling that are being employed with more than 4000 students a year.

Alden Henderson

Alden Henderson, PhD, MPH, is an epidemiologist with roles at the Hawai'i DOH and as part of the Hawai'i Public Health Workforce Catalyst Lab at UH DPHS. Dr. Henderson uses his academic training and professional experience to train public health professionals how to identify unusual occurrences of diseases and the source and route of disease transmission so that actions can be taken to control spread of the disease. He began his public health career in 1983 with the Hawai'i DOH and in 1992 joined the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the CDC. Over the next 30 years, he responded to outbreaks of toxic hepatitis in North Dakota, Rift Valley fever in Kenya, cholera in Vietnam, avian influenza in Thailand, Ebola in Sierra Leone, and COVID-19 in the US. He participated in the public health responses to Hurricanes Andrew, Iniki, Mitch, Opal, and Katrina, the World Trade Center attack, the civil war in Brazzaville, and refugee crisis in Tanzania, Kenya, and Thailand.

Simone Schmid

Simone Schmid, PhD, MPH, MSc, currently a post-doctoral researcher, working for both the UH DPHS at the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health and the CDPHPD at Hawai'i DOH. Dr. Schmid received her PhD in 2021 from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her vision is to connect academia and health practitioners to design applicable, research-based, innovative solutions and policies improving health equity by supporting populations prone to health disparities to reach their full potential.

Julia Finn

Julia Finn, BS, has worked with the UH DPHS, the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health, and the Healthy Hawai'i Evaluation Team on several public health research and program evaluation projects. She has also partnered with external organizations such as the Hawai'i Department of Education (DOE) and the Hawai'i DOH on chronic disease prevention and health promotion initiatives.

Eric Hurwitz

Eric Hurwitz, DC, PhD, is Professor and Graduate Chair of Epidemiology and Chair of the DPHS in the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the University of

Hawai'i at Mānoa. His research portfolio includes comparative effectiveness, health services, patient-centered outcomes, and epidemiologic studies using a variety of experimental and observational research designs and large clinical and population-based databases to study conventional and complementary and alternative interventions, including chiropractic care and spinal manipulation for managing back and neck pain. Dr. Hurwitz has published 170+ peer-reviewed articles.

Jermy Domingo

Jermy Domingo, DrPH, MPH, is the Community Wellness Initiatives Director at the Hawai'i Primary Care Association (HPCA), where she leads community wellness and research initiatives, providing training and technical assistance to Hawai'i's Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs). Her work focuses on community health, enabling services, and chronic disease prevention. She began her public health career as a student intern and health educator at Kalihi-Palama Health Center (KPHC). She later joined 'Imi Hale Native Hawaiian Cancer Network to coordinate cancer patient navigator training and worksite wellness programs. Jermy holds a DrPH in Community-Based and Translational Research and an MPH in Epidemiology from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

Editors

Tetine Sentell

Tetine Sentell, PhD, MA is the Chin Sik & Hyun Sook Chung Endowed Chair in DPHS at UH and the Principal Investigator of the Hawai'i Public Health Workforce Catalyst Lab.²⁸ Her research focuses on untangling the complex relation-

ship between health inequities and multi-layered factors of influence, including how community-level strengths can achieve public health goals and how social networks can support and sustain health literacy. An internationally recognized scholar, Dr. Sentell has published over 125 papers and led projects from the National Institutes of Health, the Hawai'i DOH, and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality among other funders.

Lola Hiroko Irvin

Lola Irvin, MEd, is the Administrator of the CDPHPD, Hawai'i DOH. The Division works on policy, systems, and environmental change strategies to achieve equity, and quality years of life for people in Hawai'i. Collectively, with partners, her team envisions healthy choices being the default wherever people live, work, shop, and play.

Rebekah (Becky) Rodericks

Becky Rodericks, MSc, is research faculty at the UH DPHS. She serves as a lead investigator or project director for several research and evaluation projects including the Hawai'i Health Data Warehouse, the Healthy Hawai'i Evaluation Team, and most recently the Hawai'i Public Health Workforce Catalyst Lab, where she has collaborated closely with Hawai'i DOH. Her research interests have focused primarily on evaluating programs that promote physical activity, nutrition, and tobacco-free lifestyles. She also enjoys the innovative and exploratory work of the Catalyst Lab, where she helps coordinate workforce initiatives to help strengthen the PHW in Hawai'i.

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