

# Importance of Building the Public Health Workforce: Commentary by the Hawai'i Public Health Infrastructure Grant Workforce Director to Introduce the Special Issue on Public Health Workforce Development in Hawai'i

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## Commentary Overview

This brief, personal commentary is included to introduce the importance of this Special Issue "*Public Health Workforce Development in Hawai'i: Building a Post-Pandemic Future to Achieve Health Equity*" and the public health workforce generally for the state of Hawai'i. This commentary describes the perspective of the Public Health Infrastructure Grant (PHIG) Workforce Director and Principal Investigator with contextualizing details and perspectives around the public health workforce.

## Abbreviations

PHIG = Public Health Infrastructure Grant

DOH = State of Hawai'i Department of Health

## Public Health Infrastructure Grant Workforce Background

My role is the PHIG Workforce Director and Principal Investigator. The PHIG is an investment by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to ensure that every US community has the necessary skilled people, services, and systems to promote and protect health. It aims to accomplish this through efforts of data modernization, recruitment and retention of the public health workforce, and by addressing longstanding public health infrastructure needs.

## My Journey to Public Health

I joined the State of Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) with no domain knowledge in public health. In the past 9 months, I am beginning to learn how incredibly diverse the Department's responsibilities are and the immense role our employees play in ensuring the wellbeing of our community. As a lifelong resident of Hawai'i, I have taken much for granted... clean air, clean water, the beauty in our natural and built environments, access to quality health care, stable family life, and a high degree of confidence in the food we eat. Since joining the Department, I have learned just how much I have taken these things for granted. My short time at the Department has given me a deeper appreciation for the quiet, vigilant watch our employees hold in safeguarding our community and how their efforts have made my life much richer.

I have had the honor of serving in a variety of roles in service to the residents of Hawai'i. I am always impressed by the dedication of my colleagues who choose careers that protect the public interest and wellbeing. I truly believe that our employees' dedication to public service is a binding agent that links a robust social network of other state agencies, health care partners, environmental partners, and other community stakeholders who collectively contribute to meeting our Department's mission of promoting and protecting the physical, psychological, and environmental health of the people of Hawai'i through assessment, policy development, and assurance.

## Vision for the public health workforce in Hawai'i now and in the future

In the coming year, I think it is important to lay a strong foundation of partners working together to create an ecosystem that supports an agile, adaptable, and vibrant public health workforce. This ecosystem will contribute to and support a public health workforce that embraces the application of new technologies; is accepting of the risks that accompany innovative solutions; is emboldened to solve complex problems that do not exist today; and accomplishes this with the same passion, commitment, and purpose of our current workforce.

A strong foundation is important because similar ecosystems are emerging in many other competing industries. Industries such as, Accommodations/Food Service, Health Care/Social Assistance, Professional/Scientific/Technical Services, and Retail are seeing business, education, and community partners joining forces to develop a similar ecosystem that supports greater competition for a decreasing market of skilled, adaptable, and agile labor. Organized public health partners working together to strengthen both the current and future workforce serves as the foundation of an ecosystem that ensures that we can continue to attract and retain the best and brightest workers who are dedicated to protecting the health and wellbeing of our community.

Hawai'i will remain a highly desirable place to live, work, and play over the next 5 to 20 years. As work becomes more global and technology solutions fill both talent and labor gaps, I think Hawai'i will face market conditions including higher cost of living and increased competition for limited number of jobs, that make it even harder for people who are dedicated to public service including public health, to live and work in Hawai'i. The resulting effect could be an even

faster rate of emigration of working aged adults to states with lower costs of living and/or higher wages, accelerating the loss of skilled labor. The June 27, 2024, release of US Census Data on Hawai'i, shows a decline of 16,043 residents overall from July 1, 2020, to July 1, 2023.<sup>1</sup> What's more concerning is the larger decrease of 26,533 people among working aged adults between the ages of 15 to 64 years during the same period.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, the population of residents ages 65 through 85+ increased by 22,965.<sup>1</sup>

This cursory view of the Census data suggests a growing demand for specialized care of senior residents served by a decreasing labor force. This is intuitive to most residents of Hawai'i who provide or pay for the care and support of our *Kūpuna* (older adults). When you add in other environmental factors such as climate change as well as social-economic factors such as international travel returning to pre-pandemic levels, and equitable access to health care, there is increasing strain on our public health services. This is why having a strong ecosystem that supports Hawai'i's public health workforce is critically important. The ecosystem must allow for quality pathways for recruitment and an equally impactful and vibrant professional development opportunities. It must also be adaptable enough to ensure the timely shifts in the public health services that reflect Hawai'i's changing population as well as other social, environmental, and community wellbeing needs.

## Resources, conversations, and collaborations

Along with many other workforce initiatives, the conceptualization, development, and implementation of the Hawai'i Public Health Workforce Catalyst Lab is a great collaboration to build momentum to support the workforce. Events such as the Hawai'i Public Health Workforce Stakeholder Meeting, partnership for the inclusion of a public health track in the 2024 Hawai'i Health Workforce Summit, and this Special Issue are vital to increasing awareness and developing a comprehensive understanding of the labor market conditions and the current and future public health workforce needs.

Continuing to work closely with our public and private education partners through joint curriculum development efforts, increasing work-based learning, and professional development opportunities for our incumbent public health workforce increases our probability of fostering agility in our workforce. Tough funding and management discussions

and decisions that support investments in our current and future public health workforce that address root-cause issues and focus on result-based solutions that increase productivity, will be critical to sustaining our island way of life.

Conversation around the larger labor market that extends beyond industry sectors and sub-populations of both Hawai'i and the nation's workforce are extremely important. Conversations and policy discussions that focus on federal programs that support returning unemployed workers (3% to 7% of the labor force, the U3-U6 levels of labor underutilization which include short and long term unemployed, discouraged, marginally attached, and underemployed workers) back to work remain important.<sup>2</sup> We need to also have conversations around the 93% to 97% of the workforce that we rely on for our community's wellbeing including, responsible and equitable economic growth, environmental protection, social harmony, and health and wellness.

Programs that help to reduce the cost of living in Hawai'i for high worker shortage areas such as the Governor's loan repayment program for health care workers, and the workforce housing pilot program administered by the Hawai'i Housing Financing and Development Corporation are extremely important initiatives that help to position Hawai'i as a competitive and attractive location for retaining working aged professionals.

## Conclusions

I love living in Hawai'i. Joining the DOH, learning more about the great work our employees do, and how their efforts contribute directly to the wellbeing of our community gives me a sense of pride and purpose as a member of the DOH *'ohana* (family) and a small contributor to the public health workforce ecosystem. But more than that, it 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. This Special Issue "*Public Health Workforce Development in Hawai'i: Building a Post-Pandemic Future to Achieve Health Equity*" provides useful evidence to help make this goal possible.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed in this document are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the State of Hawai'i Department of Health.

## References

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2. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Alternative Measures of Labor Underutilization for States, Third Quarter of 2023 through Second Quarter of 2024 Averages. Accessed September 23, 2024. <https://www.bls.gov/lau/stalt.htm>