Protecting, Supporting, and Celebrating the Public Health Workforce in an Age of Political Polarization and Burnout

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Presenter Disclosures

Paulani Mui

(1) The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

No relationships to disclose

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Every day, people in public health work to keep families and communities safe.

It's up to us to Stand With Public Health

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Methods

KEY INFORMANT SESSIONS

SECONDARY DATA ANALYSIS – PH WINS SURVEY

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Themes & Findings – COVID-19 Impacts
on the Public Health Workforce

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Key Thematic Findings

- Underfunded and insufficient infrastructure

- Disregard and distrust of public health expertise and science

- Lack of support for worker personal health and well-being

- Workforce burnout and exodus from the field

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Underfunded and Insufficient Infrastructure

"Funding going away, COVID going away, and we're going back to where we were and maybe worse than before."

- local health official

- Chronic underfunding and disinvestment in public health

- Pandemic funding placed additional burden on staff to onboard short-term workers

- Erosion of public health capacity to address ongoing public health challenges

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Disregard & Distrust of Public Health Expertise and Science

- Increased and continued politicization of public health along with distrust and disregard of public health expertise both from the public and elected officials

- Over the past two years, many states have proposed or enacted legislation restricting public health authority.

  - 16% of the workforce and nearly 2 in 5 executives (41%) reported experiencing bullying, threats, or harassment (PH WINS)

  - 28% of the workforce and 59% of executives felt their public health expertise was undermined or challenged (PH WINS)

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Lack of support for worker personal health and well-being

- Public health workers report feeling overworked, de-valued, and unsafe, impacting not only themselves but also their families

- More than 1 in 5 employees reported fair or poor mental health, and 55% reported at least one Post-Traumatic Stress Symptom (PTSS) (PH WINS)

- Those with progressively more PTSS were more likely to consider leaving. (21% of respondents with 0 PTSS vs. 40% with 4 PTSS (p<.0001). (PH WINS)

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Workforce Burnout and Exodus

"The stress has caused a multitude of behaviors - excessive sick time, reactionary comments and loss of filter, loss of discipline, shutting down and getting less done (overwhelmed)..."

- state health official

- Continued disillusionment resulting in stress, burnout, and mental health issues

- Increased exodus depletes the workforce and increases burden on remaining staff

- Top 5 reasons for leaving: Pay; Work overload/burnout; Lack of advancement opportunities; Stress; Organizational climate/culture (PH WINS)

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Actions Needed

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Identified Needs & Recommendations

– Worker protections

- **Prevent**: Provide appropriate safety education, training, and resources and assure all workplace violence claims will be promptly investigated and addressed.

- **Protect**: Develop and implement a reporting system for harassment/violence. Provide training in de-escalation techniques and foster a culture of peer support.

- **Sustain**: Build and maintain relationships with legal counsel and law enforcement to provide employees with guidance as appropriate.

  Designate a staff member or committee to champion and 'own' this issue, and maintain active and accessible employee assistance programs.

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Identified Needs & Recommendations

- Adequate staff capacity and training
  - Implement policies and procedures to ensure sufficient surge staffing

- Mental health supports
  - Operationalize an employee wellness framework or equivalent
  - Create a supportive environment for staff to feel seen and heard
  - Offer free counseling and resources for employees

- Overtime compensation
  - Transition to a more culture-based human resources system

- Telework capacity and flexibility
  - Institutionalize policies to support employees, e.g., flexible work schedules, time off, etc.

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Key Aims & Next Steps

Improve organizational policies and supports to protect not only public health workers but their families

Implement systems-level practices for workforce support and appreciation

Prioritize employee safety and mental well-being as a fundamental component of public health infrastructure.

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Thank You

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