

When the Rubber Meets the Road: Public Health Nurses Convene to Address Barriers to Practice and Advance Health in Maryland

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In late 2016, a public health nurse (PHN) workforce study was initiated in Maryland. Nurse leaders from 19 of the 24 local health departments (LHD) participated in interviews and 490 nurses completed an online survey. We found that only 53% of the LHDs had a PHN Director position and there was an overall decrease in the number of nursing positions and programs led/staffed by PHNs in recent years. Among nurses surveyed, an estimated 37% of the PHN workforce in Maryland, the average number of years worked as a PHN was 25 years and the average age was 54 years. More than half (51%) of the nurses including PHNs, school health nurses (SHN), APRNs, and managers earned \$60,000 or less. Forty percent had a BSN, 20% an AA in nursing, 13% LPN, 13% a MSN, 15% other degrees and less than 1% had a doctoral degree. They identified barriers to practice, strategies to promote PHN practice and highlighted various initiatives that they were engaged in that promoted a culture of health in their communities.

Following the completion of the study, PHNs and SHNs from every local jurisdiction were invited to attend one of five regional workshops, based on geographic region. The purpose of the regional workshops was to disseminate the study findings, engage the nurses in further discussion of the barriers to PHN practice identified in the study, and identify action steps to address these barriers.

After a presentation of key study findings, the PHNs and SHNs at each workshop were grouped either by county or by work setting (local health department or school health) for group activities. The group activities included an assessment of current PHN strengths and positioning at the local and state levels, a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, and an exploration of the top four barriers to develop action steps to address each barrier.

Nurses from all but 2 of the 24 local jurisdictions participated in the workshops. Attendance was good at all the regional workshops, with 122 PHNs and SHNs attending. Participants identified common areas of concern: absence of a PHN leader position at the Maryland Department of Health; PHN/SHN workforce issues - low salaries; lengthy and complicated hiring policies; aging workforce with little success in recruiting younger nurses; lack of incentives to seek advanced education; lack of advancement opportunities; poor recognition, respect, and value for their work; educational and training needs; lack of a professional nursing organization home for Maryland PHNs; data management challenges; and poor funding for public health.

Overall, the workshops were well received, and the nurses provided positive feedback. Next steps include continuing to engage PHNs, SHNs, and other key stakeholders, sharing opportunities, providing support, and encouraging and empowering the nurses to disseminate and share their work to increase

awareness and promote collaborations and publications.

This project has been developed in collaboration with Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Maryland Action Coalition, the Maryland PHN Directors Council, the Maryland Department of School Education, and the Maryland School Health Nurses Association.