

# Local Public Health Workforce Survey

## Executive Summary

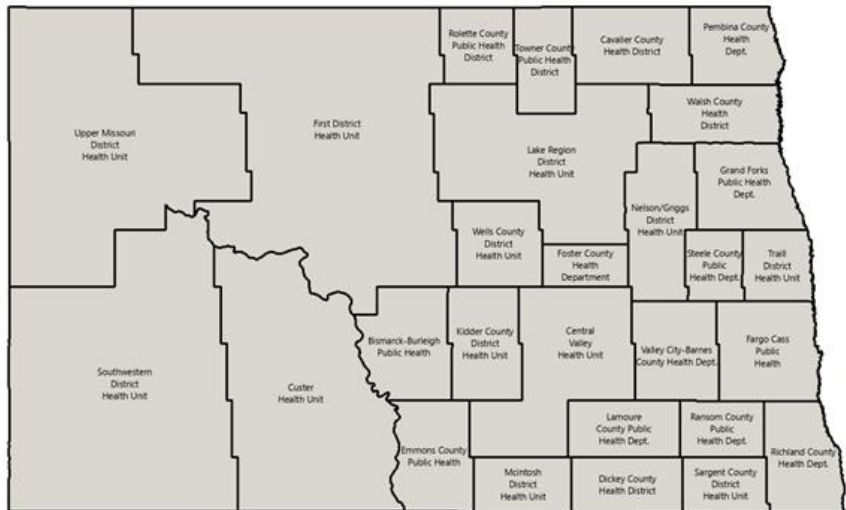
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### BACKGROUND

There are 28 independent local public health units (LPHUs) across the state of North Dakota. LPHUs provide access to health services such as child immunizations, adult immunizations, tobacco use prevention, high blood pressure screening, injury prevention screening, blood lead screening, and early or periodic screening diagnosis and treatment.

LPHUs in North Dakota are known to have challenges recruiting and maintaining public health workforce. The purpose of this survey is to gather details on LPHU workforce shortages, including critical need positions and reasons for open vacancies, in addition to gauging how units could utilize a loan repayment program as an incentive to attract and keep public health staff.



### SURVEY DESIGN

The survey process was defined by two methods, including 1) a 12-question online survey and 2) optional follow-up focus interviews. Of the 28 LPHUs in North Dakota, 26 (93%) completed the online survey and 19 (68%) participated in optional focus interviews. Unit administrators completed the online survey submissions in November 2022 and participated in follow-up interviews in the following weeks.

### SURVEY RESULTS

Figure 1 on page 2 illustrates responses to specific positions that are difficult for LPHUs to staff. Public health nurses were universally reported as the most challenging position to recruit and retain. LPHUs also cited unit administrators, environmental health, and prevention/addiction positions as difficult to recruit and retain. Several LPHUs conveyed that no positions were difficult to staff, most of which are in rural areas with few FTEs.

## SURVEY RESULTS, CONT.

### Why are public health staff difficult to recruit and retain?

When asked why positions are challenging to recruit for, 19 (73%) LPHUs cited low wages and compensation. Other frequent answers were related to in-demand specialties, a small applicant pool, and rural location or travel requirements.

Responding to why it is difficult to *keep* staff, 18 (69%) again cited low wages and compensation. Lack of advancement opportunities, rural location, burnout, and retirement were also factors listed by units.

### How would a loan repayment program be utilized?

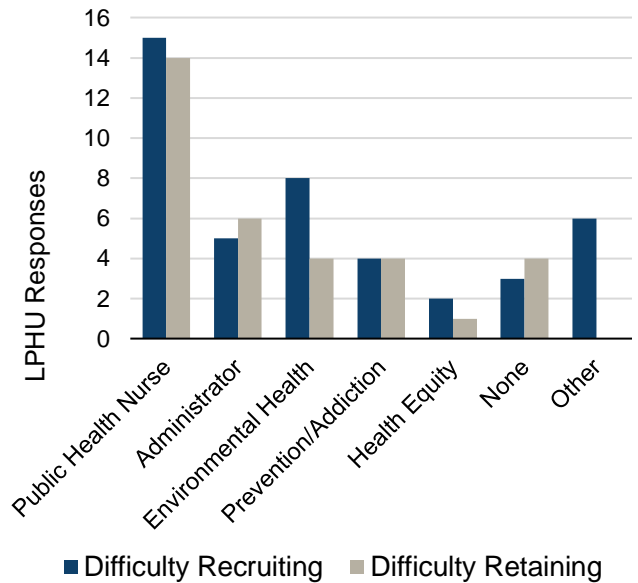
Eighteen (69%) participating LPHUs responded that they would take advantage of a student loan repayment program to address workforce challenges, while the remaining did not know (27%) or responded no (4%). Unit administrators often mentioned better recruitment as an impact of potential loan repayment, as it could allow them compete with companies offering similar programs. Further, several responses described that it would alleviate some wage and compensation shortfalls – a critical factor in attracting and keeping public staff.

## DISCUSSION

Unit administrators consistently described nurses, particularly RN staff, as valuable to the LPHU because they can carry out public health activities, administer vaccinations, and provide direct clinical care. Nurses also frequently fill the role of unit administrator, as almost all administrators at the time of the survey had a nursing background.

Presently, no LPHUs advertise positions that require a Master's degree (MPH, MS), with no incentives to get or keep Master's level-staff. North Dakota State University

**Figure 1:** What Public Health Positions do you Consistently Have Difficulty Recruiting or Retaining?



and the University of North Dakota train Master's-level public health students.

Based on LPHU responses in this survey and successful loan repayment programs operating in the state for other health professions, a similar program could offer valuable incentives to recruit and retain staff in addition to building the capacity at the local level to employ North Dakota's growing workforce professionally trained in public health.

### Acknowledgements

*North Dakota LPHU administrators and staff who participated in the survey series.*