

# Public Health Nurse Learning Labs

July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2025

Session 1– Understanding the Landscape: The Role and Impact of Public Health Nurses Today

## Agenda

1. **Welcome, Introduction, and Framing**
  - Allison Budzinski (ASTHO) | [abudzinski@astho.org](mailto:abudzinski@astho.org)
  - A.C. Rothenbuecher (ASTHO) | [arothernbuecher@astho.org](mailto:arothernbuecher@astho.org)
  - Shirley Orr (APHN) | [shirleyaorr@gmail.com](mailto:shirleyaorr@gmail.com)
  - Paula Kett | [pmk@uw.edu](mailto:pmk@uw.edu)
2. **Context and plans for PHN Learning Lab: [Slido Poll](#) | Presented by Shirley Orr (APHN)**
  - **PHN Learning Lab Library:** <https://www.phnurse.org/learning-lab>
    - Maintain through a series of five sessions in hope of providing it as an ongoing resource to support PHN.
  - Resource: [Community/Public Health Nursing \[C/PHN\] Competencies](#)
3. **PHN Roles & Trends | Presented by Paula Kett**

## Why PHNs Matter | Core Contributions

- **Trust & Connection:** PHNs build relationships and trust within communities, which is essential for successful public health outcomes.
- **Broad Knowledge Base:** They possess deep knowledge about diverse populations and communities.
- **Big Picture Vision:** PHNs can analyze and respond to complex public health issues.
- **Workforce Competence:** PHNs support and help create a skilled and competent healthcare workforce.

## Interactive Peer-to-Peer Dialogue: Public Health Nursing (PHN) Challenges & Changes

### Key Issues:

- **Funding Cuts & Workforce Impact:**
  - Reductions in federal and state funding lead to fewer PHN positions, with governmental agencies hiring lower-level staff.
  - These cuts affect the recruitment, retention, and compensation of PHNs, causing difficulty in maintaining a skilled workforce.

- Public Health Nurses (PHNs) are increasingly asked to take on more responsibilities as programs and services are reduced.
- Limited funding hampers the ability to attract and retain nurses due to lower wages compared to other specialties.
- **Shifting Roles & Responsibilities:**
  - PHNs are essential for maintaining community health, but many face competing priorities (e.g., emergency response, increased demand).
  - The role of PHNs as health strategists in their communities is vital but often underappreciated or misunderstood.
  - Some view non-nurse roles (e.g., social workers, community health workers, administrators) as substitutes for PHNs, but this view fails to acknowledge the unique clinical expertise nurses bring.
  - Limited understanding of PHN responsibilities outside of specific specialties reduces recognition of the profession's full potential.
- **Impact on Training & Recruitment:**
  - The local university's cessation of clinical rotations with health departments limits exposure to PHN practice for nursing students.
  - Students often find public health clinicals uninspiring (e.g., failed home visits), discouraging them from pursuing PHN careers.
  - Need for improved clinical experiences that showcase the meaningful impact of PHN work.

### **Key Concerns:**

- **Burnout & Work-Life Balance:**
  - Many PHNs experience burnout, particularly post-pandemic, as workloads increase while resources are limited.
  - There is a strong call for wellness programs and better work-life balance for PHNs to mitigate fatigue and retain staff.
- **Value Communication & ROI:**
  - It is difficult to convey the value of PHNs, especially when competing with higher salaries offered in other fields (e.g., acute care, private industry).
  - A need for standardized metrics to quantify the impact of PHNs, including tools like QUALYS and cost-savings analysis (net present value).
  - Some argue that ROI data could help demonstrate the value of PHNs, particularly in areas like cost reduction and health outcomes improvement.
- **Compensation & Resource Gaps:**
  - Lower compensation in public health compared to private and hospital settings, despite additional benefits like health insurance and retirement plans.

- There's a deficit in PHN resources, such as infrastructure to recruit students, especially in smaller counties.
- Opportunities for Improvement:
  - Building Workforce Capacity:
    - More investments in recruitment and retention strategies for PHNs, including competitive compensation and professional development opportunities.
    - Enhanced collaboration between local health departments, universities, and nursing programs to better engage students in public health nursing.
    - Support for PHNs working in emergency preparedness and other high-demand areas, including flexible staffing and recognition of their crucial roles.
  - Addressing Role Misunderstandings:
    - Need to educate stakeholders on the unique contributions of PHNs compared to other roles like administrators or community health workers.
    - PHNs bring valuable clinical skills and a deep understanding of social determinants of health that non-nurses cannot replace.
  - Support for Nursing Students:
    - Creation of richer, more engaging clinical experiences in public health, with a focus on real-world impact and exposure to diverse PHN roles.
    - Developing backup activities to ensure meaningful experiences for students, even when direct home visits or clinical work isn't possible.

### Long-Term Concerns:

- Future Workforce Shortage:
  - A lack of experienced PHNs may lead to a shortage of nursing faculty and hinder the growth of public health nursing programs.
- Reduced PHN workforce threatens the profession's ability to advocate for health equity and influence policy development.

### Themes and Observations from the Chat:

#### Challenges

- **Wage Disparities:** Salary gaps deter candidates; public health nurses (PHNs) often cannot compete with hospital or private sector wages.
- **Funding Cuts:** Ongoing federal and state budget cuts limit hiring and retention of PHNs; lead to replacement with lower-level positions.
- **Burnout:** PHNs experience fatigue and burnout post-pandemic; need for employee wellness programs.

- **Limited Clinical Exposure:** Nursing students have fewer meaningful public health clinical experiences (e.g., failed home visits), leading to reduced interest in PHN careers.
- **Devaluation of PHN Role:** PHN not widely recognized or valued compared to other nursing specialties or administrators (MPH/MPA), social workers, or community health workers.
- **Recruitment Challenges:** Loss of clinical rotation partnerships with local universities limits student exposure to PHN; infrastructure to support students is lacking.
- **Geographic/State Variability:** Differences in funding, salary, and PHN workforce depending on state/local health department structure (centralized vs. decentralized).

### Impacts

- Decreasing PHN workforce threatens care access, especially for vulnerable populations.
- Reduced experienced PHNs will cause future faculty shortages, weakening PHN advocacy and health equity efforts.
- Lack of PHNs hinders community health strategy and emergency preparedness efforts.

### Opportunities & Suggestions

- **Quantify PHN Impact:** Develop standardized measures and ROI data to communicate value and cost savings.
- **Leverage Benefits:** Highlight government benefits (health insurance, retirement) alongside wages.
- **Promote PHN as Health Strategist:** Emphasize unique clinical skills and holistic patient care that administrators or social workers cannot replace.
- **Improve Clinical Training:** Provide richer, diverse public health nursing experiences to nursing students (e.g., community nursing rotations).
- **Advocate for Policy Changes:** Push for role redefinition through statutes, Boards of Nursing, and policy.
- **Support Education:** Expand PHN education initiatives (e.g., credentialing programs, population/global health courses).
- **Innovate Funding Models:** Explore billing for direct nursing services (e.g., care management) to reduce reliance on unstable funding.
- **Enhance Inter-agency Collaboration:** Build infrastructure and partnerships to support student clinicals and workforce development.

### Additional Observations

- PHNs play essential roles in emergency response and community health gaps.
- Diverse hiring in social work and CHW roles is noted; PHN workforce tends to be more homogeneous.

- Some state-level institutions compensate nurses more than PHN roles due to union negotiations.
- Trust in nurses remains high, underscoring the importance of strengthening PHN roles amid public health crises.