

Strengthening Public Health

Executive Statement:

The COVID-19 pandemic has strained local and state public health units across the country. In order to preserve and strengthen public health in North Dakota, the North Dakota Public Health Association has put forth a resolution requesting that the legislature and the governor take action to support and strengthen public health, both in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and also as a general demonstration of helping set up North Dakota to reclaim its status as the healthiest state in the country. The time is now for North Dakota state leaders to use their authority to make decisions and use state resources to protect the health of the public by strengthening the public health infrastructure.

Background:

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, public health units were understaffed and lacking sufficient funding to meet even the routine essential services of public health.

During the pandemic public health professionals were required to assume heavy workloads, take on challenging responsibilities such as surveillance, data analytics, and public communication, which many were not well trained for, and endure public scorn for representing the government in their efforts. And yet, they performed heroically.

But this created an exhausted and demoralized public health workforce across North Dakota, with many left wondering about their futures. The public health workforce shortage crisis has only worsened.

Public health professionals should be recognized and resourced so they can truly protect the public's health.

Quick facts:

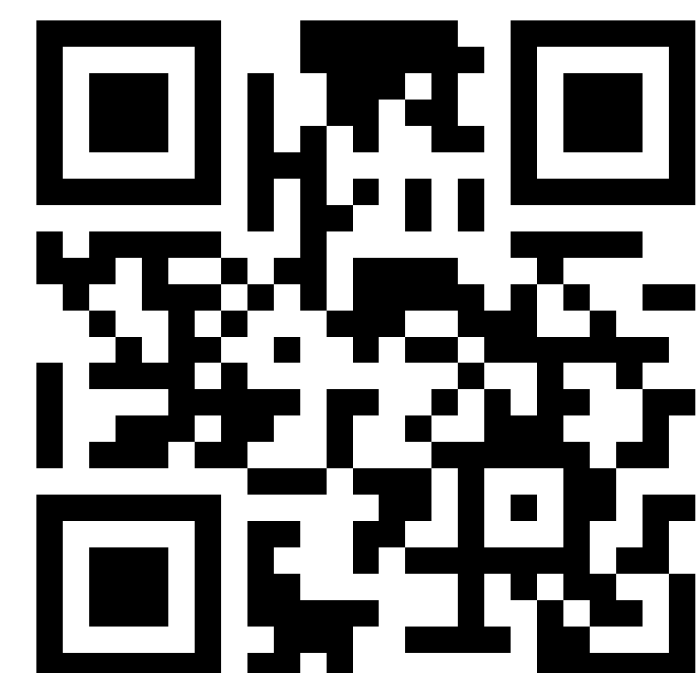
Healthcare professionals in North Dakota are eligible for **loan repayment for serving in hardship locations**, but public health professionals are not.

32% of state and local public health employees across the country are considering leaving their organization in the next year

Actions by the **North Dakota Legislative Assembly have limited public health authority** which compromises their ability to fulfill their public health charge.

Only **14%** of public health professionals have **formal public health training**.

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Recommendations:

The NDPHA recommends that the governor and the North Dakota legislature take the following actions in support of public health:

- Recognize National Public Health Week (early April each year), Indigenous Public Health Day (April 4), and Public Health Thank You Day (Monday before Thanksgiving), with official proclamations demonstrating strong support for the work of public health in North Dakota and for the persons who are devoting their lives to work in public health.
- Enact legislation that protects the public's health, supports the public health workforce, and reverses the roll-back in public health authority that was enacted in the 2021 legislative session.
- Establish a North Dakota Public Health Workforce Loan Repayment Program for individuals who have earned a Masters, or Doctorate degree in Public Health from one of North Dakota's accredited public health programs, are Certified in Public Health, and have a practice location in a North Dakota local or state public health organization.
- Require the reading of the Public Health Code of Ethics for all full-time state and local public health employees and public health board members, with occasional opportunities to discuss the code and align one's responsibilities with it.

Key Points:

- Standard 8.2 in the Public Health Accreditation Board standards requires that the local public health unit demonstrate their commitment to "Build a competent public health workforce and leadership," including such examples as education assistance, continuing education, certification in public health and others. Local public health needs state-level support to meet this standard.
- Since 1992 there has been a 300% increase in public health graduates in the country, and since being established in 2012, the two Master of Public Health programs at NDSU and UND have graduated many talented young professionals for our state. And yet only 14% of surveyed local public health professionals nationwide have formal public health training. Reasons include graduate school debt, low paying public health jobs, and the jobs being in hardship locations. In order to ensure that all North Dakotans receive high quality public health services, incentives are needed to attract qualified persons to take positions in local public health units. A loan repayment program would help.
- Public health professionals are demoralized after having responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. Public recognition of their contributions to the health of North Dakotans before, during and after the pandemic will increase their morale, and improve public understanding of their role.

