

Public Health Solutions Through Changes in Policies, Systems, and the Built Environment

Specialized Competencies for the Public Health Workforce

walkable neighborhoods
school nutrition
child passenger safety seats
clean indoor air
bicycle lanes
tobacco advertising
preventive health benefits
zoning

Directors of Health Promotion and Education

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Introduction

Throughout the country, public health professionals are helping communities decrease the burden of disease and injury by making it easier to develop a healthy lifestyle. Rather than change the individual behavior of one person at a time, they are influencing public and organizational policies, improving organizational and inter-organizational systems of operation, and enhancing the built environment. These strategies arise from the very roots of the public health profession which focuses on population-level impact to improve the public's health.

Public health professionals are learning to focus their efforts on ensuring that healthy behaviors can become daily routines. For example, in the realm of chronic disease and injury prevention, collaborative partnerships include efforts to:

- Create more walkable neighborhoods
- Guarantee access to smoke-free public spaces and worksites
- Regulate tobacco marketing to youth
- Provide nutritious beverages and foods in school cafeterias
- Provide daily physical activity to all students
- Require bicycle helmets for all riders
- Require safety seats for all passenger children in motor vehicles
- Develop preventive health insurance benefits
- Require a Health Impact Assessment as part of the land-use planning process

These improvements are happening in many places – however, such changes take time, sometimes years, and often involve many stakeholders. For example, increasing school requirements for physical activity can involve educating the school board, school district superintendent and school principals about the prevalence of youth obesity and the importance of ensuring daily physical activity for all students. It also involves helping the administrators and teachers identify practical ways to provide this important activity in an already busy curriculum. Other times the collaborative effort involves non-traditional partnerships with new agencies like the city/county planning department. It may require learning about the interests of stakeholders like the local business community.

In many places, public health collaborations and partnerships are learning to propose and respond to legislation, convince worksites to adopt certain policies, and refine zoning ordinances to ensure more liveable environments. Although the process can be complex, the potential health and economic impact can be profound when entire populations adopt healthier behaviors. These population-based strategies can help state and local health agencies demonstrate their effectiveness at preventing disease and promoting health. However, skilled staff and supportive management are needed to ensure the strategies are implemented to their full potential.

This document answers the following questions:

- How were the HPEC competencies developed?
- How do the HPEC competencies relate to the Essential Services and other competencies?
- What professionals can benefit from the HPEC competencies?
- How will the current and future workforce learn the HPEC competencies?
- What are the HPEC competencies?
- What are the next steps?

Purpose of this document

Identify specialized competencies needed to change policies, systems and built environments.

Who Is It for?

Public health professionals including: Health Agency directors and commissioners, division directors, program managers, health promotion staff, health educators, clinical staff working in health promotion and preventive medicine. Please share this document with others.

Curriculum

Training curriculum has been developed for the current and future workforce. Visit us at: www.DHPE.org.

How Were the HPEC Competencies Developed?

The Directors of Health Promotion and Education (DHPE) in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in *Policy and Environmental Change: New Directions for Public Health* (2001) about the efforts of state and local agencies to improve health outcomes by using strategies that change policies and environments. The report recommended that “health policy and environmental change” (HPEC) competencies be identified and a training curriculum developed to ensure the workforce is skilled in collaboratively applying such strategies.

DHPE contracted with faculty and staff at the UNC School of Public Health to develop the HPEC competencies. The project team conceptualized the work in three phases of research:

- **Phase 1** – Identify an initial list from competency compendiums¹ and other secondary sources, and receive feedback from DHPE and CDC stakeholders.
- **Phase 2** – Conduct an iterative revision process to incorporate feedback from cycles of interviews with approximately 100 federal, state and local potential end-users of the competency list and future training curriculum. Compare the working version with three published competency lists² and incorporate similar language as appropriate.
- **Phase 3** – Conduct a validation and skills-gap analysis. Convene a Curriculum Advisory Committee to support the development of competency training curriculum. Pilot and revise training modules for wide release.

How Do the HPEC Competencies Relate to Essential Services and Other Competencies?

The public health system performs the three functions of assessment, policy development, and assurance by delivering Ten Essential Services to citizens. These specialized HPEC competencies can help a local health agency provide the Essential Services that are concerned with: diagnosing health problems (#2); developing policies and plans (#5); and ensuring a competent public health workforce (#8). Public health professionals who become proficient in these specialized competencies will be able to assess problems that need a policy, system or environmental solution. They will have the necessary skills to help state and local agencies propose policy solutions meant to improve health outcomes while ensuring economic and political feasibility. With these skills, professionals working in health departments will be able to help those agencies demonstrate staff competence for health promotion.

Public health professionals working in this area will need specialized skills such as: issue framing, policy analysis, policy formulation, message tailoring, and media advocacy. This document includes these unique skills within specific competencies that amplify the policy-related competencies found in other sources². Because these HPEC competencies are intentionally narrow in focus, they do not address other skills that indirectly support work on policies, systems and environments. For example, “collaborates with community partners” and “communicates effectively” are important skills to have mastered prior to working on policy change. “Social Marketing” skills are beneficial in many aspects of health promotion. These and other skills for public health professionals are already addressed in multiple training curricula (for example, read about social marketing at: <http://www.TurningPointProgram.org>). For more information about basic public health skills, read about the *Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals*: <http://www.Train.org>.

¹ Seventy-six competency sets were identified as related to the project, including competency sets listed in *The Future of Public Health in the 21st Century* (Institutes of Medicine, 2003), and often-cited public health competency projects sponsored by the Council on Linkages between Academic and Practice, SOPHE – AAHE – NCHCEC, and ASPH. (Complete methods reported in Crump, Letourneau and Emery (2004) report to DHPE, and presented by Crump and Emery to DHPE (2005), CDC (2006) and at national conferences (2006).

² Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals; National Health Educator Competency Update Project; Association of Schools of Public Health core competencies for MPH degree.

What Professionals Can Benefit from the HPEC Competencies?

The HPEC competencies can benefit staff who develop and implement health promotion programs and community health education projects. Such staff might include: health promotion coordinators, health educators, program managers, nutritionists, evaluators, non-profit staff, executive-level managers, and clinical staff who may also work on population-based strategies. The list of competencies can serve as a guide for hiring people with policy-related experience, training and managing staff, developing workplans, and conducting performance appraisals.

The HPEC competencies suggest a broad range of policy-related skills, and therefore it might not be realistic to expect one employee to become proficient in all competency areas. While some public health staff might benefit from and seek proficiency in multiple competency areas, it might be more feasible to consider each staff's responsibilities and ensure proficiency in selected competency areas. Additionally, employees will vary in their level of proficiency on these competencies. Professionals who are new to this work will probably focus on acquiring a basic mastery of select competencies. Staff can use these competencies to identify training opportunities that will increase their proficiency over time. Professionals who are more experienced might use these competencies to refine the "art" of assessing the local political climate and working effectively with both supporters and opponents to further state or local agency goals.

How Will the Current and Future Workforce Learn the HPEC Competencies?

The current workforce needs opportunities to learn how to change policies, systems and the built environment. A collaborative process will develop a multi-level training curricula that could include: training institutes; fellowship programs; multi-day state and regional workshops; pre- and post-conference training sessions; internet courses (e.g., satellite broadcasts, internet live-meetings, webcasts); and a website for downloading print and presentation materials. Directors of Health Promotion and Education and their partners will be announcing these training opportunities as they are developed.

To ensure the future workforce is proficient at influencing policies, systems and the built environment, these specialized competencies and curriculum can also inform the development of graduate courses within Schools of Public Health; graduate programs in Community Health, Public Health Nursing, and Health Education; and undergraduate or community-college curriculum.

What Are the HPEC Competencies?

The HPEC competencies are grouped into five domains or areas of responsibility. The domains are ordered to suggest an iterative sequence of steps found in both public health interventions and policy advocacy campaigns. The next few pages provide a brief description of each domain and then list the specific competencies. A concise list of the competencies is presented at the end of this document.

Five Competency Domains

- 1. Assessing and framing the policy problem**
- 2. Using policy analysis tools**
- 3. Influencing the policy change process**
- 4. Implementing enacted policies**
- 5. Evaluating policy interventions**

HPEC Competency Domains

1. Assessing and framing the policy problem³

Many public health problems are complex and arise from more than one potential cause (e.g., obesity, cardiovascular disease). Public health professionals need to collaborate closely with partners and other stakeholders to skillfully articulate the root causes of a problem and identify how the health, political and organizational systems have contributed.

To understand the problem's complexities, evidence must be collected, analyzed and summarized, especially information about the constituency of the decision-makers. Information sources might include health, education, economic, and transportation data; public policy databases; published research; media; organizational reports; and long-tenured agency staff who remember past efforts at solving the problem. It is critical to learn about past attempts to address the problem through changes in policies, systems or the built environment.

Understanding the problem also requires a familiarity with the current political climate, such as how decision-makers feel about the issue, and whether they might be supporters or opponents of change. Decision-makers are influenced by many stakeholders, including people who can be considered the policy elites, and these interested stakeholders must become part of the analysis. Understanding the political climate includes becoming familiar with the relevant pieces of the public health system; policy processes at all government levels; the policies and procedures of any stakeholders' organizations; and governmental processes to improve the built environment including those that do not require policy change.

Someone who is proficient in these competencies will have the skills needed to continually tailor the description of a problem to the interests of diverse groups. They will be able to frame or reframe information in response to the political context and provide compelling evidence on the need for a solution.

2. Using policy analysis tools

Generally, the way a public health problem is framed will suggest a type of solution. How a problem is understood helps determine whether educational, legislative or procedural and regulatory pathways are used to improve the situation. Public health professionals and their partners will benefit from being able to formulate solutions that address issues at multiple levels.

For example, the problem of youth obesity might be framed in terms of how the school setting provides opportunities to be physically active during the school day. Possible solutions might include changing school policy, state legislation, and the built environment. For example, a **local policy** solution might include school or school district (local education authority) policies defining how often physical education (PE) classes and active recess are provided for each student. **Statewide legislation** could establish PE standards for all districts and certification requirements for PE teachers. A **systems** solution could encompass many of these procedural

Domain #1 Competencies

- a. **Collects, summarizes, and interprets information relevant to an issue³**
- b. **Defines the problem needing a policy, system, or environmental solution**

Domain #2 Competencies

- a. **Defines criteria for selecting among proposed options to improve the problem**
- b. **Records the options in clear and concise written statements³**
- c. **Estimates the health, fiscal, administrative, legal, social, and political implications of each option³**
- d. **Predicts the feasibility and expected outcomes of each option³**
- e. **Analyzes the options using decision analysis methods (e.g., cost-benefit)³**
- f. **Builds consensus for the chosen course of action**

³ Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals (developed by the Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice; <http://www.Train.org>).

and policy changes that would be strategically reinforcing across multiple levels (e.g., classroom instructional techniques, school recess and PE activities, district PE teacher credentialing and daily activity requirements per student, state agency incentives for districts with policies that require daily physical activity for all students and demonstrate participation). A **built environment** solution might establish indoor and outdoor facilities for active recreation of many sorts.

Sometimes more than one alternative solution will seem possible, especially when the perspectives of diverse stakeholders are included. In order to provide recommendations to decision-makers, it will be important to compare the solutions to one another and to the current, unchanged situation. Public health professionals who develop these competencies will be better able to work with partners to define criteria for selecting among multiple proposed solutions. They will become proficient at analyzing and identifying an optimal choice, and working with partners to frame the solution for the targeted policy-makers, planners, and government staff who implement procedures.

3. Influencing the policy change process

This competency domain accounts for the full range of actions public health professionals and their partners may use to influence change processes. For example, many public health professionals provide education on health-related problems and the potential impact of proposed solutions. Many professionals also develop communication strategies to inform the general public and officials about health issues and possible solutions.

However, state and local agencies vary in how much they allow staff to engage in the political process. For example, some agencies place very few constraints on their employees' ability to work on policy, systems and environmental change. Some agencies collaboratively plan their employees' policy efforts to ensure uniformity of goals and messages. Some agencies restrict their employees' efforts to only helping government officials develop policies or implementation rules if their assistance has been requested in writing. Other agencies strictly regulate employee communication with government officials and do not permit staff to work on policy issues.

Therefore, before starting to work on health problems that need policy, system-level and environmental solutions, it is important that public health professionals learn whether any laws or organizational policies restrict them from working directly with decision-makers and elected officials. It is also important to distinguish between legal and managerial restrictions regarding advocacy strategies. Constraints that are not legal, might be alleviated by staff helping upper management better understand what is needed to accomplish this type of health promotion work and demonstrating their competency.

Proficiency in this competency domain will help ensure that the public health professional can serve as a resource to decision-makers and media. Within the limitations of their position, and with their partners, they will be able to use advocacy and communications strategies to frame key messages, promote social learning, and influence the policy agenda. With partners, they will vigilantly monitor the change process to ensure that the resulting policy, procedure or environmental change meets the intended goal.

Domain #3 Competencies

- a. Plans an approach to change policies, systems, built environments**
- b. Educates decision-makers, media, partners, and the general public by providing relevant information (i.e., become an informational resource)**
- c. Frames messages and tailors materials to influence the change process**
- d. Implements policy-advocacy strategies**
- e. Implements communications strategies to impact social learning, agenda setting, and message framing**
- f. Monitors the change process and its outcome**

4. Implementing enacted policies

Once a policy, environment or system change has been enacted, it is important for the interested stakeholders to remain vigilant and engaged while the enacted change is developed into various agency's budgets, rules, guidelines, and procedures. Many decisions will be made by staff in those separate agencies, organizations and departments. If no one monitors the outcome of this decision phase, an enacted victory for public health can become administratively weakened and result in a negligible impact.

For example, once a city/county executive or commission approves a policy that requires installing missing segments of sidewalk, that commitment must be supported in budgets (e.g., the capital improvement plan for the city/county or a department's maintenance/repair budget). Without financial support the environmental change could lose priority among staff members who oversee improvements that are a funded priority. When a policy leaves the legislative entity that formulates and approves it, public health professionals and/or partners should meet with the implementing staff to help ensure the intention of the policy survives the process of translation into public works procedures.

Proficiency in this competency domain will ensure that public health professionals remain vigilant through this important, and frequently forgotten, phase of the change process.

Domain #4 Competencies

- a. **Predicts how the relevant bureaucratic entities (e.g., agencies, departments) might implement the enacted changes**
- b. **Plans how to monitor and assist each entity as it develops the budgets, rules, guidelines and procedures necessary to implement the enacted change**
- c. **Assists entities with planning for structural and programmatic adjustments**
- d. **Monitors the implementation process to document how the solution is or is not functioning as intended**

5. Evaluating policy interventions

Although evaluation competencies are listed in this last domain, they are considered when planning how to influence policies, systems and environments. Public health professionals might already be familiar with evaluating both the process and impact of a program, and those skills can be applied to evaluate these new strategies.

Domain #5 Competencies

- a. **Develops mechanisms to monitor policy/system/environmental change**
- b. **Evaluates the impact of the change**
- c. **Incorporates evaluation findings into future planning and analysis efforts**

Because public health professionals are increasingly under pressure to demonstrate outcomes, it is important to evaluate the changes to policies, systems and environments so that decision-makers can understand the results of their efforts. It is equally important to understand why the intended change succeeded or failed. The analytic process of evaluation provides those answers.

Evaluation might include documenting what was changed and measuring the impact it had on the built environment, the relevant organizational systems, human behavior, and ultimately on the health problem being addressed. Collaborating partners can participate in the evaluation measures, analyses, and reporting so that they learn how their organization's efforts contributed to reducing the problem. Evaluation results can also help staff and partners understand how to become ever more competent at this type of intervention work.

Policy change is not a quick process – it takes dedication, broad collaboration, strategy and an ability to identify opportunities. Public health professionals who are competent in evaluation will be able to reinforce the commitment of their partners for the long-term effort by showcasing improvements.

Next Steps

This document describes the competencies needed by public health professionals who are trying to find public health solutions through changes in policies, systems and the built environment. Knowing the competencies is the first step. Use this list for developing job descriptions, recruiting new staff, and identifying staff development needs.

The next step is the development of training opportunities to reach federal, state and local levels of the public health workforce. Watch for announcements of training opportunities based on these competencies.

As you use this document, please consider sending the authors your feedback so they can continue to refine these competencies and the training curriculum.

HPEC Competencies in Five Domains

1. Assessing and framing the policy problem

- a. Collects, summarizes, and interprets information relevant to an issue³
- b. Defines the problem needing a policy, system, or environmental solution

2. Using policy analysis tools

- a. Defines criteria for selecting among proposed options to improve the problem
- b. Records the options in clear and concise written statements³
- c. Estimates the health, fiscal, administrative, legal, social, and political implications of each option³
- d. Predicts the feasibility and expected outcomes of each option³
- e. Analyzes the options using decision analysis methods (e.g., cost-benefit)³
- f. Builds consensus for the chosen course of action

3. Influencing the policy change process

- a. Plans a policy/system/environmental change approach
- b. Educates decision-makers, media, partners, and the general public by providing relevant information (i.e., become an informational resource)
- c. Frames messages and tailors materials to influence the change process
- d. Implements policy-advocacy strategies
- e. Implements communications strategies to impact social learning, agenda setting, and message framing
- f. Monitors the change process and its outcome

4. Implementing enacted policies

- a. Predicts how the relevant bureaucratic entities (e.g., agencies, departments) might implement the enacted changes
- b. Plans how to monitor and assist each entity as it develops the budgets, rules, guidelines and procedures necessary to implement the enacted change
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