



A Science Base for Public Health

Developing a research agenda for public health systems and services research

SUMMARY

The field of public health services and systems research has emerged over the past decade to address uncertainties about how to effectively organize, finance, and deliver public health services in the United States.

From July 2010 through October 2011, [Altarum Institute](#)¹ worked with a consortium² of organizations and engaged researchers, health care practitioners, and other stakeholders to produce a revised research agenda for the field—building on a previous agenda-setting process conducted in 2001. The goal was to mobilize the nation’s scientific community to undertake critical research to create strategies to improve public health.

Key Results

- **PHSSR stakeholders engaged in an expert review process to create *Research Agenda: Public Health Services & Systems Research*.** An [article](#) about the research agenda and the process for its development was published in a May 2012 supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.³ See the [Bibliography](#) for details. See the [Appendix](#) for a summary of the agenda-setting process.

The agenda comprises the 72 research questions in four categories. Following are examples of the questions in each category:

- The public health workforce
 - What models are most effective in recruiting qualified workers into public health jobs?

¹ Altarum Institute, located in Alexandria, Va., integrates research, technology, analysis, and consulting skills aimed at solving complex problems to improve human health.

² The consortium includes Altarum Institute, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the RWJF-funded National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services & Systems Research at the University of Kentucky College of Public Health.

³ Available [online](#).

- What standardized assessment methods are most effective in producing valid and reliable measures of the skills and competencies attained by public health students and practicing professionals?
- Public health system structure and performance
 - What methods provide the most valid, reliable, and relevant means of defining the geographic and organizational boundaries of public health delivery systems at local, state, and national levels?
 - What measures provide the most valid and reliable indicators of the implementation and impact of quality improvement strategies in public health settings?
 - Public health financing and economics
 - How does implementation of a uniform system for classifying, tracking, and reporting public health financial resources influence the effectiveness, efficiency, and outcomes of public health strategies delivered at local, state, and national levels?
 - Which investments in public strategies have the largest effects on health outcomes (e.g., healthy life expectancy and quality of life), and what are the costs of delivering these strategies at local, state, and national levels?
 - Public health information and technology
 - What established and new measures provide the most valid, reliable, and feasible indicators of the health outcomes attributable to public health strategies?
 - What are the information-seeking behaviors of public health practitioners, and what factors influence these behaviors and the strategies used for addressing information needs?

Lessons Learned

Namratha Swamy, PhD, MHS (project director), offered the following lessons to RWJF:

1. Use web-based technology to efficiently exchange information and build consensus. “It’s nice to have in-person meetings, but it’s no longer necessary thanks to web technology,” said Swamy, who noted there are savings in cost and time associated with web-based communications. When developing a research agenda, give stakeholders multiple opportunities to re-think their positions and critique the comments of others. Stakeholders said that having the agenda-setting process facilitated on a secure web page enabled active participation over an extended period.

Funding

RWJF provided a \$123,927 grant to Altarum Institute.

Afterward

The project was complete with the publication of the revised research agenda.

With RWJF funding, the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services & Systems Research at the University of Kentucky continues to work to further the growth and impact of the field of public health services and systems research.

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APPENDIX

The Process for Creating the Research Agenda

Identifying Research Gaps

- Altarum Institute synthesized some 600 articles about public health services and systems research published between January 2005 and October 2010 and developed an initial list of research gaps organized into four categories: organization and structure; workforce; finance; and data, technology, and methods.
- Another literature review of the same set of articles, commissioned by the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services & Systems Research, assessed the quality of the research.
- An open online survey asked respondents about research gaps they perceived.
- PHSSR stakeholders participated in a series of interactive webinars. Through these webinars, 64 individuals identified and prioritized research gaps and recommended strategies to address them.

Vetting with PHSSR Stakeholders

- Altarum Institute posted the preliminary research agenda on an open, interactive website for a 30-day comment period.
- The project invited state health officers to participate in a Web-based focus group to review and comment on the preliminary research agenda.
- Altarum Institute and project partners presented draft versions of the research agenda at two conferences and one annual meeting to solicit in-person comments.

Formatting the Research Agenda

- A nine-member team of PHSSR research scientists transformed 113 critical information needs in the PHSSR inventory into 72 empirical questions within four categories: the public health workforce; public health system structure and performance; public health financing and economics; and public health information and technology.
- A consortium comprising Altarum Institute, RWJF, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services & Systems Research reviewed the 72 formulated questions and finalized the research agenda.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Articles

Journal Article

A Consortium from Altarum Institute, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services & Systems Research. “A National Research Agenda for Public Health Services and Systems.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 42(5 Suppl. 1): S72–S78, 2012. Abstract available [online](#).