



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Forum on the Future of Public Health Nursing

February 8, 2012
Princeton, New Jersey

Proceedings and Feedback:
Summary Report

Background and Context

The size, makeup, and preparation of the governmental public health system's workforce greatly affect the ability of agencies to protect and improve the health of people in their jurisdictions. Although comprehensive data on the overall public health workforce are lacking, there is consensus that public health nurses (PHNs) constitute the largest professional segment of the public health workforce, and that they assume a wide variety of roles in health departments, including providing clinical care to individuals, health planning, surveillance, management, and serving as directors at the local and state levels. Limited knowledge about the characteristics of nurses working in public health and the diverse roles they play make it difficult to determine the most strategic and sustainable approaches to providing training that will increase the skills and impact of the public health nurse workforce.

“There are many opportunities to redefine public health nursing while public health goes through this makeover. Nurses bring critical thinking, nursing theory, and evidence-based practice to the table along with an understanding of the core public health functions and how to implement them.”

—Participant in focus groups/key informant interviews

Multiple forces are influencing the context of public health and the many roles public health nurses play. These include: 1) health reform and the uncertainties about how it will affect public health functions; 2) deep cuts in public health budgets and staff due to budget shortfalls; 3) new consensus definitions on the scope and competencies of public health nurses; 4) recommendations from the Institute of Medicine

2010 report, *The Future of Nursing: Leading Change, Advancing Health*, including that 80 percent of nurses achieve bachelor-level degrees by 2020; 5) public health agency accreditation and adoption of quality improvement measures; and 6) transition in public health toward a greater emphasis on chronic disease prevention and interventions that will improve conditions in the community that are conducive to health for all populations, and the recognition that there are multiple determinants of health, including both the physical and social environments in which people live, work and play. These trends increase the complexity associated with identifying key needs and optimal methods to educate and train the extant public health nurse workforce.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) decided to convene a wide range of stakeholders, including leaders and experts representing the public health workforce, to gain insights into these issues. The result was the *Forum on the Future of Public Health Nursing*, held in February 2012 at the Foundation's headquarters in Princeton, New Jersey. Participants agreed that such a Forum, with action-oriented dialogue, was long overdue. They also agreed that it was very successful in highlighting the full range of challenges and opportunities facing public health nursing today, and setting the stage to develop a shared vision for the future direction of the field. The Forum focused on several new models for academic-practice partnership and the development and implementation of educational programs that could prepare public health nurses for emerging roles.

This report describes results from the Forum process, including surveys and interviews conducted prior to the Forum, material covered during it, and the priority recommendations of those who attended, gathered through a survey conducted afterward.

Prior to the Forum: Focus Group and Key Informant Interview Responses

Prior to the Forum, RWJF conducted key informant interviews, focus groups, and listserv surveys to identify the influences shaping the future of public health nursing, as experienced by practicing PHNs and educators. Approximately 1,500 PHNs working in academia and at all levels of practice were targeted, and more than 500 responded to these calls for information. Responses provided valuable feedback on challenges facing the PHN workforce, as well as opportunities for PHNs, given the rapidly changing public health environment. A qualitative analysis of the responses from the interviews and focus groups identified several key themes.

Strategies to Optimize Opportunities for Public Health Nursing

1. Build and communicate a shared vision for the role and value of public health nursing
2. Develop and test new models for public health nursing practice
3. Develop and disseminate new educational models
4. Forge new strategic partnerships
5. Expand leadership development opportunities
6. Expand the evidence base for public health nursing practice

Not surprisingly given today's economic environment, many participants identified funding cuts and workforce shortages as major challenges. As one individual explained, "The decrease in funding and number of public health positions at the state and local levels, along with the downgrading of educational qualifications for nursing positions, is of grave concern."

Respondents identified wide variation in levels of nurse education as another major challenge facing the PHN workforce. One explained,

"In agencies where there are better prepared PHNs, the agency administration viewed them as flexible staff who could support a variety of roles, and therefore were worth the investment. In agencies where PHNs were generally less well prepared, they were seen as limited in their ability to span functions and take on more responsibility, making them easy targets for staff cuts because of their higher salary level." Considering the large proportion of public health workers who are nurses, this vulnerability has the potential to severely undermine the delivery of essential public health services.

Next-Step Strategies for Pursuing Opportunities

Many focus group participants and key informants saw the changes affecting public health as opportunities for improvement rather than as challenges. As one participant said, "There are many opportunities to redefine public health nursing while public health goes through this makeover. Nurses bring critical thinking, nursing theory, and evidence-based practice to the table, along with an understanding of the core public health functions and how to implement them." Six different opportunities, and suggested strategies to realize those opportunities, surfaced. (see summary in sidebar)

1. Build and communicate a shared vision for the role and value of public health nursing

Related to the importance of a shared vision, participants noted that PHNs need to demonstrate and communicate the importance of the field to external partners. These partners include educational institutions, as well as other public health disciplines, with whom PHNs can build a better understanding of multi-disciplinary practice and mutual roles and responsibilities. "We need to develop and promote the business

case for public health nursing, to identify the value-added contribution of public health nursing,” said one participant. Another agreed: “There is a great need for a clear, consistent communication strategy for public health nursing that communicates the role and value to multiple audiences, including system stakeholders.”

2. Develop and test new models for public health nursing practice

Several participants noted the importance of including PHNs when new models for practice are developed. One person stressed the need for PHN involvement in new roles and models for care, such as community care and population-level disease prevention. The strength of PHNs in community engagement was addressed by another: “I see the future of public health nursing as using new models to engage diverse stakeholders to promote healthier communities, and focus on preventing chronic disease.”

“PHNs have become a forgotten army that can be widely mobilized.”

—Participant in focus groups/key informant interviews

3. Develop and disseminate new educational models

Some participants cited educational issues when reporting challenges facing the PHN workforce. In response to inconsistent preparation for practice, one person stated, “We need to better address the needs for transition to practice at all levels. This includes new models for continuing education, residency, and practicum. We also need models to support new grads as well as those transitioning from other roles in nursing.” Another respondent noted, “Better dissemination of models for academic-practice linkages and dedicated resources to support linkage efforts are critical.”

4. Forge new strategic partnerships

In an environment of change, participants noted that defining nursing roles in terms of traditional tasks and partnerships will no longer be adequate. One said: “As a profession, we must strengthen existing partnerships and explore new opportunities to join forces with local, state, and national partners to help them achieve their health objectives.” Offering a specific action step, another stated, “PHNs must be engaged with the Future of Nursing: *Campaign for Action*—PHNs should grab on and influence it to reflect public health nursing issues.”

5. Expand leadership development opportunities

While PHNs play a unique role in community outreach and collaboration, they have not always led the intentional development of partnerships. Yet as one participant pointed out, “Communities benefit when public health nurses bring their broad perspectives and knowledge of the community to engage partners in community health assessment and improvement. PHNs need leadership skill development to support these roles.” Another agreed, noting the need for PHNs to begin “leading change in our health care system—or at least finding a place at the table! [We must] elbow our way to the forefront of health reform.”

6. Expand the evidence base for public health nursing practice

Finally, participants recognized the need to back advocacy and systems change efforts with an evidence base. “We need more evidence and documentation of effective models to gain attention of policy-makers, similar to the Nurse-Family Partnership model,” one noted. Another suggested an expansion to current PHN grant-making methods, while still keeping in mind the importance of an evidence base: “Public health nursing needs funding for small and local pilot programs that can be tested and ‘ramped up.’ Pilot these in a variety of settings, including urban and rural. Measure the outcomes, evaluate, and disseminate.”

Forum presentations: Educational models focused on the public health nurse workforce

One Forum session focused on three collaborative models for PHN education: Linking Education and Practice for Excellence in Public Health Nursing (LEAP); Keeping RNs to Improve and Strengthen Practice (KRISP); and PHN Ready.

- *LEAP* focuses on competency-oriented education for PHNs—including students, practicing clinicians, and academic faculty—at all career stages. Coordinated through the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it presently serves state, local, tribal, and school nursing collaboratives in Wisconsin.¹
- *KRISP* involves six local health departments in Washington State and Illinois, along with academic partners from the University of Washington and the University of Illinois Chicago. It engages RNs in addressing quality improvement challenges not only within the workforce, but also during recruitment.²
- *PHN Ready*, an online continuing education/certificate program, offers CEU or CNE credit, leading to a “PHN Ready” certificate. Though the program is administered by the University at Albany School of Public Health, course content is based on the Quad Council’s Core Competencies for Public Health Nurses and is nationally relevant. Supported by a U.S. Department of Labor grant, the program offers the PHN Ready coursework and certification at no charge.³

1 <http://research.son.wisc.edu/leap/>

2 <http://krispproject.wordpress.com/>

3 <http://www.albany.edu/sph/cphce/phnready.shtml>

PHN Forum Conclusions and Next Steps

Attendees at the Forum identified 12 potential next steps/priorities through discussion and written feedback and prioritized them after the Forum via an online survey (see sidebar below). Participants also answered questions regarding the transitioning roles of PHNs in governmental agencies, cost-effective educational offerings for competency development or degree completion to prepare PHNs for future roles, and priority education and training issues to help practicing PHNs prepare for the future. Data collection was completed in June 2012. Survey responses indicated strong support for priorities that: 1) focus on demonstrating the value and effectiveness of emerging PHN practice roles;

2) optimize education to prepare PHNs for emerging roles; and 3) build leadership capacity for new strategic partnerships.

In connection with the Forum, a special Workforce Advisory Committee of national PHN and workforce leaders was convened to support the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation-funded “*Enumeration and Characterization of the National Public Health Nursing Workforce*” project. Led by the University of Michigan Center for Excellence in Public Health Workforce Studies (CEPHS), this effort will result in a profile of the nation’s PHN workforce, including an enumeration of worker education and training

Prioritization of Next Steps

- Explore strategies to demonstrate the effectiveness/value of promising PHN practice interventions, including pilot/demonstration projects
- Promote broadly educational offerings and resources that support the changing PHN role
- Expand strategic local, state and national partnerships to assure PHN engagement in key initiatives
- Promote leadership development opportunities for PHNs
- Support PHN engagement in the Future of Nursing: *Campaign for Action*
- Support attainment of BSN degrees by PHNs
- Support attainment of advanced degrees (master’s degree and higher) by PHNs
- Disseminate information about current educational offerings and resources broadly to the PHN community
- Explore strategies to support academic-practice partnerships and share outcomes with the PHN community and stakeholders
- Explore strategies to promote/strengthen interdisciplinary education opportunities by engaging leaders from practice and academia
- Develop a communications plan to leverage the PHN enumeration work
- Support the continuation of the Forum discussion at other venues (existing PHN organizations, conferences, etc.) to maximize effectiveness, coordination, and collaboration among public health and nursing organizations

as well as job setting and function. Preliminary results were presented at the American Public Health Association meeting in October of 2012, and complete results, including responses to individual-level surveys, will be available in January of 2013.

Strengthening existing collaborations and creating new linkages between research, education, and practice are essential to ensuring that the PHN workforce has the wide range of skills needed to meet emerging challenges in the 21st Century.

Additional next steps will include exploring strategies to better align existing education and leadership resources with identified needs in the public health nursing workforce. There are also opportunities to align resources with needs through collaborations with the *Public Health Training Centers* (PHTC) Network⁴ and the *National Public Health Leadership Development Network* (NLN).⁵ The PHTC Network is a group of 37 Health Resources and Services Administration-funded education/training centers, each representing a partnership between a school of public health, other academic partners, and practice-oriented public health organizations. The NLN is a consortium of state, regional, national, and international public health leadership institutes; funding sources and admissions requirements vary between programs.

As public health agencies increasingly focus on quality and accountability through national accreditation and attainment of public health standards, PHNs face both opportunities and challenges. Because of their strong presence in health departments nationwide, PHNs are well-positioned to lead efforts related to accreditation, community assessment, health improvement planning, quality improvement, performance management, and strategic planning.

Collaborative efforts, including those illuminated by the Forum on the Future of Public Health Nursing, provide a foundation for demonstrating the value of PHNs assuming new practice roles, optimizing education to prepare PHNs for emerging roles, and building leadership capacity through new strategic partnerships.

4 <http://bhpr.hrsa.gov/grants/publichealth/trainingcenters/index.html>

5 <http://www.heartlandcenters.slu.edu/nln/index.html>

About the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation's largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to health and health care, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, measurable, and timely change.

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