

**Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals:
A Practical Tool to Strengthen the Public Health Workforce**

By
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The Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice adopted a list of Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals on April 11, 2001. In developing a consensus as to what these core competencies should be, the Council utilized the knowledge and perspectives of many in the world of public health. Collaborating for more than 10 years with leaders, researchers, teachers, and practitioners in public health, the council refined and validated cross-cutting competencies applicable to practicing professionals. The process of formulating competencies began by cross-walking all existing competency lists for public health practitioners and academicians, to determine which skills were relevant to all disciplines. It then worked with a diverse subgroup, representing public health agencies, organizations, and academic institutions, to draft and refine the list.

During the extensive public comment period, practitioners and academicians from various disciplines - including physicians, nurses, administrators, epidemiologists, and health educators - visited the Competencies Project Feedback web site (www.TrainingFinder.org/competencies) to provide their input on the relevance of each competency to the actual practice of public health. Public health professionals also gave verbal feedback to Council staff during meetings, which included sessions at the annual meetings of the Council on Linkages member organizations, and a public hearing during the American Public Health Association annual meeting in November 2000. The opinions of more than 1,000 reviewers and the research of experts confirmed the relevance of these 68 core competencies to the public health profession.

With the finalization of the core competencies, the next step will be to disseminate the list and promote its use as a tool for assessing and meeting public health workforce needs. The Council is excited about the many ways in which this list of skills and knowledge can be used to enhance public health workforce development efforts. Core competencies can serve as a framework for education and training, assessment and evaluation, quality improvement, and accountability activities. Academic institutions may use core competencies for objective setting and curriculum review and development. Community-based and national organizations may use them in developing discipline-specific competencies. Health departments may utilize the competencies in staff performance measurement, and in the refinement of personnel systems, and they are useful to federal, local, and state health agencies in continuing education and training, assuring continued competence of the public health workforce.

The Health Resources and Services Administration provides funding for the Core Competencies project and has promoted the use of the competencies in their Public Health Training Centers (PHTCs). Mr. John Kress, Director of the Public Health Training Centers, states, "Many of our Public Health Training Center academic and practice partners have assisted the Council in defining and developing the core public health competencies and their attendant skill levels. The framework emerging as the final product is a helpful guide to all those involved with training and development efforts, and can assist in our assuring that the public health workforce has the

needed skills and competencies to effect the 10 Essential Public Health Services. Many of the PHTCs will use the competencies in their workforce training and education efforts."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also agrees that the core competencies will be important to workforce development efforts. They plan to use the list as part of the Global and National Implementation Plan for Workforce Development. "The core competencies provide a foundation for developing practice-focused curricula to strengthen front-line preparedness," states Dr. Maureen Lichtveld, Associate Director for Workforce Development of CDC's Public Health Practice Program Office. "Our Centers for Public Health Preparedness will begin building a curricula framework from these competencies this year, integrating informatics, public health law, genomics, and emergency response/bioterrorism preparedness components and further delineating health communications and leadership development section," she added.

Furthermore, the core competencies have already demonstrated their usefulness in the field. The Utah Department of Health, Division of Community and Family Health Services, used the list to self-assess the level of competence of supervisors and managerial staff in each of the eight domain areas. By using the list as a training assessment tool, the division was able to determine areas in which their program managers had high levels of proficiency and where training needs were the greatest. Dr. George Delavan, Division Director, states, "Decision making must be evidence-based for it to be prudent and responsible. This tool has helped us identify and prioritize training needs for our managers that are 'actual,' rather than depending on guesswork. This will be instrumental in developing and maintaining a competent public health workforce."

A process, not an end

The practice of public health is dynamic and ever-changing - with the emergence of new diseases, the growth of populations, and the constant advances in biomedical, social, and behavioral sciences. Public health workers must commit to lifelong learning and be capable of adapting to new challenges in order to effectively and efficiently meet the public's needs. With that in mind, the core competencies cannot be static - they must be updated as the profession changes, in order to accurately identify the most important skills needed at that time.

The Council has therefore adopted the core competencies for a three-year period and will review the list for potential revisions by 2004. Revisions will be based on an analysis of the practical usage of competencies in the field. In order to collect this qualitative data, the Council has modified its competencies web site (www.TrainingFinder.org/competencies) to allow users to share examples of how they have applied the competencies. Examples are sorted by category of use, including curriculum review and development, discipline-specific competency development, workforce needs assessment, performance measurement, personnel system refinement, and other. Users may also comment on the usefulness or limitations of the list. This method of continuously monitoring the application of the core competencies will assure their utility, and allow the public health workforce to learn together the most effective strategies for strengthening our infrastructure.

While the task of defining core competencies has unique challenges, the reward of a common framework that grasps the skills necessary to perform the Essential Public Health Services is overwhelming. This list of core competencies - transcending discipline specific boundaries - will

help to solidify and unify public health as a profession and a public health workforce even more competent than it is today. Developing and refining a set of competencies that address today's and tomorrow's public health needs is a worthy challenge that the Council will always be willing to tackle.

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