

Will there be enough public health workers when baby boomers retire?

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Baby boomers are beginning to retire in large numbers and many professions will have to attract and train replacements. In particular, the governmental public health workforce will experience significant losses

through retirement and attrition due to budgetary constraints. In a study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, researchers estimate that over one quarter of this workforce will disappear. They further project that while enough students graduate each year to replace retirees and others who voluntarily quit, they question whether the public health sector can compete with the private sector to hire qualified candidates.

According to Jonathon P. Leider, PhD, Associate Faculty at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, "the state and local [public health](#) workforce has shrunk by over 50,000 staff since the beginning of the 2008 Great Recession. Our estimates suggest almost one quarter of the governmental public [health](#) workforce plans to leave or retire in coming years. This represents the largest potential change to the workforce in decades, if not ever. But there are enough highly-educated students to meet this challenge - if public health can compete with the private sector to do so."

In order to evaluate the current public health workforce and project future needs, researchers used large datasets on governmental public health staff and state health agencies: Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) 2016 profile surveys, the 2014 Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), and the 2016 Workforce Gaps Survey (WGS). They measured workforce size, assessed demand due to retirements and workforce reductions, and collected data on [retirement](#) eligibility vs. actual retirements.

Potential workforce supply was extracted from the US National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which collects graduation, financial, staffing, and enrollment data from 7,400 US colleges and universities.

NACCHO data indicate that local health departments employed 147,000 full- and part-time staff in 2016, with about 103,000 employed by local

governments and the remainder by state or local/state partnerships. State governments employ 50,000 staff directly and another 54,000, who work in the agency's local or regional offices.

Researchers triangulated the number of staff planning to retire or quit, and how many followed through. In total, more than 65,000 staff will leave their organizations during fiscal years 2016-2020, with 100,000 staff leaving if all planned retirements occur by 2020. However, US colleges and universities now award more than 25,000 undergraduate and graduate degrees in public health each year, which could meet the demand for new staff caused by retirements and voluntary separations. They note that in some states, more than 50 percent of their [workforce](#) is eligible to retire, which could lead to localized problems with replacements.

"Because of the Great Recession beginning in 2008 and other economic considerations, staff are delaying retirement in unprecedented numbers," noted Dr. Leider. "However, this can't last forever, and agencies will see the 'silver tsunami' show up if they haven't already. Our research helps quantify this challenge."

On the supply side, the NCES estimates approximately 200,000 individuals received a formal public health degree at some level during 2000-2015. By 2020, an additional 55,000 undergraduate and 77,000 graduate public health degrees will be awarded, according to conservative estimates.

Although it appears that the mass retirements of baby boomers will be a manageable issue, "Workforce shortages are more than a mere numbers game, since the potential supply of workers far exceeds potential demand. We have to assist health departments recruit and retain highly qualified, trained [staff](#) to sufficiently meet future demands," noted co-author Elizabeth Harper, DrPH, of the Association of State and

Territorial Health Officials, Arlington, Virginia.

More information: Jonathon P. Leider et al, Reconciling Supply and Demand for State and Local Public Health Staff in an Era of Retiring Baby Boomers, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2017.10.026](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.10.026)

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