

Public health programs see surge in students amid pandemic

November 17 2020, by Michelle R. Smith and Kathy Young

As the novel coronavirus emerged in the news in January, Sarah Keeley was working as a medical scribe and considering what to do with her biology degree.

By February, as the disease crept across the U.S., Keeley found her calling: a career in public health. "This is something that's going to be necessary," Keeley remembered thinking. "This is something I can do. This is something I'm interested in."

In August, Keeley began studying at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to become an epidemiologist.

Public health programs in the United States have seen a surge in enrollment as the coronavirus has swept through the country, impacted disproportionately by the pandemic? Why is that happening?" Campbell asked. "I want to be able to come to you and say, 'This is happening. These are the numbers and this is what we're going to do.'"

The biochemistry major at Florida International said she plans to explore that when she begins her MPH program at Stempel College in the spring. She said she hopes to eventually put her public health degree to work helping her own community.

"There's power in having people from your community in high places, somebody to fight for you, somebody to be your voice," she said.

Public health students are already working on the front lines of the nation's pandemic response in many locations. Students at Brown's public health program, for example, are crunching infection data and tracing the spread of the disease for the Rhode Island Department of Health.

Some students who had planned to work in public health shifted their focus as they watched the devastation of COVID-19 in their communities. In college, Emilie Saksvig, 23, double-majored in civil engineering and public health. She was supposed to start working this year as a Peace Corps volunteer to help with water infrastructure in Kenya. She had dreamed of working overseas on global public health.

The pandemic forced her to cancel those plans, and she decided instead to pursue a master's degree in public health at Emory University.

"The pandemic has made it so that it is apparent that the United States needs a lot of help, too," she said. "It changed the direction of where I wanted to go."

These students are entering a field that faced serious challenges even before the pandemic exposed the strains on the underfunded patchwork of state and local public health departments. An analysis by The Associated Press and Kaiser Health News found that since 2010, per capita spending for state public health departments has dropped by 16%, and for local health departments by 18%. At least 38,000 state and local public health jobs have disappeared since the 2008 recession.

And the workforce is aging: Forty-two percent of governmental public health workers are over 50, according to the de Beaumont Foundation, and the field has high turnover. Before the pandemic, nearly half of public health workers said they planned to retire or leave their organizations for other reasons in the next five years. Poor pay topped

the list of reasons. Some public health workers are paid so little that they qualify for public aid.

Brian Castrucci, CEO of the de Beaumont Foundation, which advocates for public health, said government public health jobs need to be a "destination job" for top graduates of public health schools.

"If we aren't going after the best and the brightest, it means that the best and the brightest aren't protecting our nation from those threats that can, clearly, not only devastate from a human perspective, but from an economic perspective," Castrucci said.

The pandemic put that already stressed public health workforce in the middle of what became a pitched political battle over how to contain the disease. As public health officials recommended closing businesses and requiring people to wear masks, many, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top virus expert, faced threats and political reprisals, AP and KHN found. Many were pushed out of their jobs. An ongoing count by AP/KHN has found that more than 100 public health leaders in dozens of states have retired, quit or been fired since April.

Those threats have had the effect of crystallizing for students the importance of their work, said Patricia Pittman, a professor of health policy and management at George Washington University's Milken Institute School of Public Health.

"Our students have been both indignant and also energized by what it means to become a public health professional," Pittman said. "Indignant because many of the local and the national leaders who are trying to make recommendations around public health practices were being mistreated. And proud because they know that they are going to be part of that frontline public health workforce that has not always gotten the respect that it deserves."

Saksvig compared public health workers to law enforcement in the way they both have responsibility for enforcing rules that can alter people's lives.

"I feel like before the coronavirus, a lot of people didn't really pay attention to public health," she said. "Especially now when something like a pandemic is happening, public health people are just on the forefront of everything."

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