

# US health departments experience workforce shortages and struggle to reach adequate staffing levels in public health

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Gaps persist in hiring enough U.S. public health workers, and health departments continue to face challenges in recruiting new employees, according to a new study by Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health and Indiana University. Insufficient funding, a shortage of people with public health training, and a lack of visibility for public careers, in addition to lengthy hiring processes, are cited as barriers contributing to an absence of progress for achieving a satisfactory level of workers. The results are [published](#) in *Health Affairs*.

"Public health systems are currently experiencing a mismatch between the number of graduates in the field and hiring needs and will need to reconceptualize their procedures and approaches to sufficiently staff their departments to meet the nation's changing public health," said Heather Krasna, Ph.D., associate dean, Career Services at Columbia Mailman School and adjunct assistant professor of health policy and management.

Krasna continues, "Hiring managers report challenges in overcoming civil service- and merit system-related barriers, including delays in establishing positions for advertisement, vague and confusing civil service exam requirements, and comparatively low salaries." This is despite the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which provided funding to support workforce needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, even with increased funding from the American Rescue Plan Act, some health departments could not recruit new staff because of the low salaries they could offer. "Significant issues remain to be addressed if meaningful change is to happen," the research notes.

For example, it takes [government agencies](#) 204 days, on average, to complete merit-based hiring. In comparison, the [hiring process](#) in the

[private sector](#) is much quicker, averaging 12–49 days. Job candidates are often also required to take a civil service exam or another written or oral exam, which tend to be infrequently offered.

In addition, lower salaries are compounded by student loan debt, and even the generous retirement benefits that historically have been offered by government agencies are less motivational for younger hires.

Krasna and co-author Valerie A. Yeager in the Department of Health Policy and Management at Indiana University School of Public Health, propose the following next steps if governmental public health is to close the workforce gaps:

- Review hiring processes from start to finish, and establish standard metrics
- Consider workarounds to decentralize some control of the hiring process
- Convert contractors, fellows, and interns to permanent hires
- Modernize recruitment technology and marketing for improving candidate experience
- Offer competitive salaries and incentives, including the possibility of repaying student loan repayments.
- Improve permanent funding for public [health departments](#).

**More information:** When Money Is Not Enough: Reimagining Public Health Requires Systematic Solutions To Hiring Barriers, *Health Affairs* (2024). [DOI: 10.1377/hlthaff.2024.00020](https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2024.00020).

[www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/.../7/hlthaff.2024.00020](https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/.../7/hlthaff.2024.00020)

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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