



# **PUBLIC HEALTH TRAINING CENTERS:**

*Four Years of Progress  
in Public Health  
Workforce Development*

*Spring 2004*

**ASPH**  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOLS OF  
PUBLIC HEALTH

*In cooperation with the Association of Schools of Public Health*



# Overview

The Public Health Training Centers (PHTC)<sup>1</sup> program was developed for the purpose of improving the nation's public health system by strengthening the technical, scientific, managerial and leadership competence of the current and future public health workforce. It emphasizes development of the existing workforce as a foundation for improving the nation's public health infrastructure and for achieving *Healthy People 2010* Objectives, a set of health objectives for the nation to achieve over the next decade.

## PHTC and *Healthy People 2010*

A goal of *Healthy People 2010* is to ensure that federal, tribal, state, and local health agencies have the infrastructure to provide essential public health services effectively.

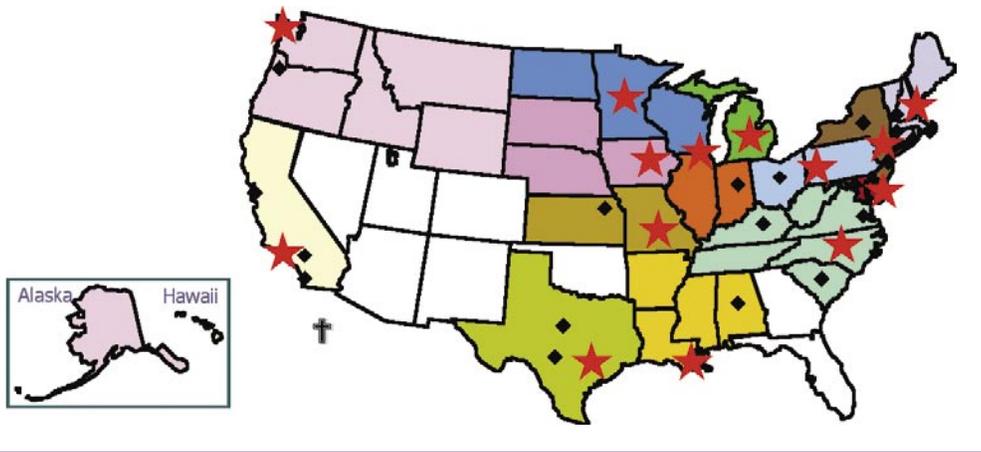
Objective 23-10 seeks to *increase the proportion of federal, tribal, state, and local public health agencies that provide continuing education to develop competency in essential public health services for their employees.*

National PHTC Network activities support this objective in the following ways:

- Over 100,000 public health workers — 81,000 from state and local health departments — have received competency-based training
- 1,000 different health departments were represented by public health workers trained by PHTC in Fiscal Year 2003
- Over 500 competency-based training courses have been developed or offered by PHTC
- All 14 PHTC conduct needs-assessments and offer foundational public health training based on the core public health competencies and the Essential Public Health Services
- The National PHTC Network collaborates with 230 public health practice organizations
- PHTC use a full array of delivery modes — including face-to-face, on-line, print, and interactive TV — to assure maximum distribution of competency-based training to members of the current public health workforce.

<sup>1</sup> The PHTC program was established under Section 766 of the Public Health Service Act, as amended by Public Law 105-392 in November 1998. Principal support for this program is provided by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) DHHS.

Currently in their fourth year of operation, each of the 14 PHTC are based at a school of public health, with each one responsible for a defined geographic area (see map below).



Although each PHTC operates as an individual center, the strength lies in the Network of 14, plus their collaboration with other academic and public health practice partners, ASPH, and HRSA. The power of the National PHTC Network is in their external partnerships. Working together, this Network is better able to provide fundamental training to a diverse public health workforce. PHTC assess the needs of the workforce and provide tailored face-to-face and distance-based educational programs and internship opportunities that meet the core needs and strengthen the skills of the current and future public health workforce. Fundamental education and training in the core competencies of public health are essential for a well-prepared workforce. Only after receiving foundational training can a public health worker be prepared to pursue specialized training in areas such as leadership development and emergency preparedness.

#### **As a National Network, the PHTC:**

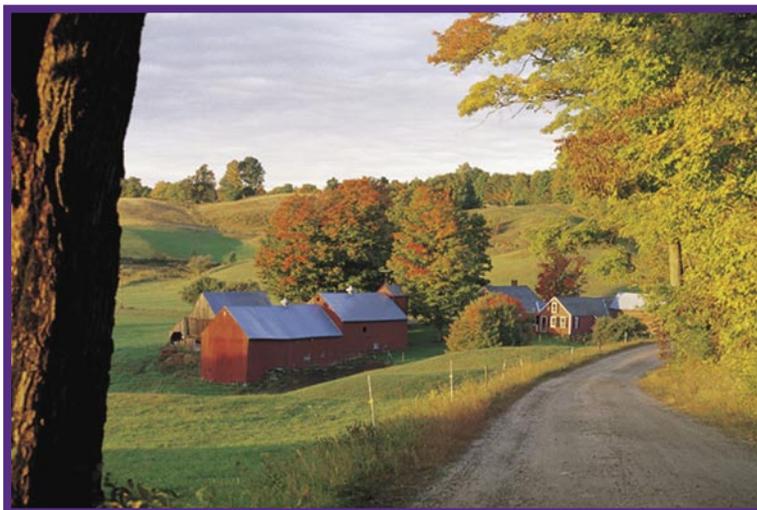
- *Develop an academic and practice collaborative* to promote workforce development.
- *Assess the training needs* of workers and their organizations in relation to the Professional Core Competencies developed by the Council on Linkages.
- *Develop training resources* (e.g., modules, courses, curricula, and support materials) to enhance workers' knowledge, skills and abilities to provide Essential Public Health Services and assure conditions in which Americans can be healthy.
- *Provide training programs* through in-person and distance-accessible media to workers in 42 states and the District of Columbia through professional meetings and conferences nationally.
- *Evaluate the impact of training* on the workforce's ability to provide Essential Public Health Services.

## Essential Public Health Services

- Monitor health status to identify community health problems.
- Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community.
- Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.
- Mobilize community partnerships to identify and solve health problems.
- Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts.
- Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.
- Link people to needed personal health services and assure the provision of health care when otherwise unavailable.
- Assure a competent public health and personal health care workforce.
- Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.
- Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

Source: *Public Health Functions Steering Committee (1994)*.

PHTC feature competency-based training and educational programs to accommodate the needs of public health workers. By offering education and training off-site, through distance learning modalities or by other creative methods, PHTC place high priority on training workers who are associated with medically under-served areas and populations. For example, the Network has taken on key issues critical to public health workforce and infrastructure — such as rural public health and public health nursing — and the Network maintains active subcommittees in both



areas. The *Rural Public Health Subcommittee* completed a rural public health policy research agenda through collaboration between the individual centers, associations and relevant federal agencies. The agenda is being disseminated to key stakeholders. Also, there is a critical shortage of public health nurses, who provide the majority of care and services in local health departments, especially in medically underserved areas. To address this shortage, the Network formed a subcommittee, the *PHTC Public Health Nursing Committee*, to develop strategies for training, preparing, recruiting and retaining public health nurses.

Individual PHTC are committed to nationwide coordination through the Network, which is supported by the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH). The National PHTC Network facilitates the sharing of approaches, methods, curricula, course materials, and evaluation instruments.

# Goals and Activities of the Individual PHTCs

Each PHTC fulfills its goal of public health workforce development by delivering foundational, broad-based, fundamental training, by partnering with professional organizations and government agencies, and by participating in a national network.

**Training.** PHTC assess the training needs of workers in their target areas and assist in the planning and development of training programs. They select materials and learning objectives best suited to particular audiences and, when needed, develop new curricula and tailored materials. PHTC offer competency-based trainings related to the Ten Essential Public Health Services. PHTC determine what technologies can best be used for their training audiences and help to develop the skills of faculty members in the use of distance-learning approaches. In addition, many PHTC sponsor field placements through their practice partners for the students at their schools of public health. In all of these ways, PHTC help individual public-health workers advance along the career ladder, thus assuring a new generation of well-qualified professionals for the future.

**Partnering.** Each of the 14 PHTC across the country works with its own team of advisors who represent health departments, client agencies, professional groups, academic colleagues, and community-based organizations. Centers involve faculty members and students in collaborative projects, developing interdisciplinary approaches to training and education. The PHTC Network maintains these same affiliations at the national level and works with other funded Centers to service the public health workforce in specialty areas. Together, these partnerships and collaborations assure the ongoing accessibility of training and education in public health.

**Building a National Network.** The National PHTC Network builds systems to support workforce development in public health. It captures data to monitor progress toward the workforce infrastructure vision of *Healthy People 2010*. It assures the sharing of curricula, materials, assessment tools, and other training resources among university-based faculty nationwide. Both individually and as a network, the PHTC develop innovative approaches to evaluate the impact of training on the performance of the Essential Public Health Services.

# Key Accomplishments of the Network

The National PHTC Network places special emphasis on workers in underserved areas and fills a need that is crucial to a workforce that is often overworked and underpaid. The PHTC provide the workforce with fundamental trainings that make it easier to do their jobs effectively and provide the skills necessary for more advanced training in areas such as leadership development and emergency preparedness. These trainings are developed and delivered over a large geographic area, cover a large percentage of the workforce, and are customized to meet the needs of the public health workforce.

**Geographic coverage.** Beginning with only two pilot centers in FY 1999, the program expanded to 14 fully-funded centers in FY2001 that are now covering 42 states and the District of Columbia. Two of the PHTC cover a single state; the other 12 PHTC cover between two and six states.

**Workforce coverage.** According to HRSA, the National PHTC Network assures access to high-quality training experiences for 92% of the estimated 450,000 public health workers nationally. In addition, the PHTC provide training for many community-based professionals and organizations that care for underserved populations.

Since training began, the PHTC have provided education and training resources to over 100,000 people, representing the full range of health professionals working in state and local agencies, clinics, and community-based organizations.

**Products and services.** Each PHTC delivers a complement of products and services customized to meet the assessed learning needs of the workforce within its own service area. PHTC training resources are indexed to the *Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals*, thus assuring high standards of practical relevance and national uniformity for all products and services. To date, the PHTC have provided over 500 unique education and training programs, including 58% basic, 32% intermediate and 11% advanced level trainings.

## Council on Linkages Core Competency Domains for Public Health Professionals

- Analytic/Assessment Skills
- Policy Development/Program Planning Skills
- Communication Skills
- Cultural Competency Skills
- Community Dimensions of Practice Skills
- Basic Public Health Sciences Skills
- Financial Planning and Management Skills
- Leadership and Systems Thinking Skills

Source: Council on Linkages Between Academia and Public Health Practice. Core Competencies for Public Health Professionals, April 2001.

# Key Accomplishments of Individual PHTC

In the first three years of operation, the PHTC conducted competency-based needs assessments of public health workers and strategic assessments for state and local agencies and many community-based organizations. Based on these assessments, they developed courses and materials to improve the delivery of the Essential Public Health Services. Using both traditional methods and innovative technologies, the PHTC delivered training at worksites, through flexible learning formats, including distance learning to ensure portability of trainings throughout the country. Importantly, the PHTC evaluated their activities and documented their impact. Some examples of the PHTC impact are listed below.

***Leveraging resources.*** The PHTC provide the link that leverages resources flowing to states and communities from a variety of federally-funded programs for health education and training. For example:

- In North Carolina, the Southeast PHTC is facilitating linkages between all the four-year nursing programs and local health departments as a way of preparing, recruiting and retaining public health nurses — the largest segment of the public health workforce and the segment facing the most critical shortages. This is the first time that schools of nursing are sharing resources among themselves, which strengthens the faculty as well as the students.



***Reaching workers on the job.*** HRSA's PHTC program was among the first federal programs to recognize the need for — and to provide — training at the public health worksite. This is a crucial need, especially for local and state health agencies, where the demand for up-to-date skills and information is high but where staffing is lean, training budgets are spare, and off-time for learning is rare. PHTC provide training programs and resources where and when they are needed. To date, the Centers have offered over 2,400 distance-learning courses, including online courses, satellite broadcasts, and CD-ROMs. For example:

- In February 2003, the New York/New Jersey PHTC launched “Orientation to Public Health,” an interactive web-based course for health department employees new to the field of Public Health. The course has been an overwhelming success, with 3,399 people having registered for the course as of mid-February 2004. 87% of trainees indicated that the course helped them gain a better understanding of the Public Health field, and 71% indicated that the information learned in the course would help them perform their jobs more effectively. In addition, a number of health departments have adopted the “Orientation to Public Health” course as a part of their orientation for new staff. This has proven to be applicable locally (e.g., The New York State Department of Health, The New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services) and across the country (e.g., Spokane County, Washington Department of Health).
- Providing training through distance-based methods and in various sites across the PHTC’s region has proven to be a successful way to reach much of the public health workforce. For example, the Heartland PHTC offers face-to-face trainings in numerous sites throughout both Missouri and Kansas in order to reach all public health workers, especially those in rural areas. Often, the interest has exceeded the capacity of the training. CD-ROM versions of each of these trainings have been developed and distributed, allowing for greater reach in the Heartland Center’s geographic area and for use by national audiences. Similarly, at the Michigan PHTC, providing distance learning courses has allowed access to training in the most remote of Michigan’s rural communities.
- The Texas PHTC has offered approximately 35 different educational products, and has reached over 1,000 participants since its inception. Several thousand additional people have utilized TPHTC’s written materials and training sessions at annual meetings of the Texas Public Health Association, the professional organization of public health workers in Texas. In addition, due to the expansiveness of the state, many participants have received training through remote locations as distance learners.
- The Upper Midwest PHTC offered “The Threat of SARS: What We Know, What We Don’t Know, and What We Need to Do” via web streaming, DVD, CD and VHS, in order to reach the public health workforce in their region and beyond.



***Impact on workforce development for public health.*** After three full years of operation, the PHTC can point to substantial contributions to competency building for the public health workforce. For example:



- At the University of Pittsburgh, the Pennsylvania & Ohio PHTC developed and delivered a 30-hour training that focused specifically on program planning and evaluation. This practical, strategic approach to training proved to be very effective. When compared to pre-training documents, the county health department's post-training Annual Program Plans had clearly improved. The new program plans had measurable goals and objectives that focused the agency's performance on real health outcomes for the county population.
- The Pacific PHTC offered 22 face-to-face trainings that were focused on developing individual capacity for audiences varying from frontline public health employees to nurses and health officers. Training topics included Public Health 101, improving cultural competency, addressing health disparities such as obesity and translating epidemiological data into improved practices and policy. This Center's online Public Health 101 course is available in both English and Spanish.
- The South Central PHTC conducted a one-year follow-up to assess how the knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with the *Health Risk Assessment and Taking an Exposure History* course transfer to improved job performance. One hundred forty-six public health practitioners who completed the training were surveyed. Results of the evaluation suggest that successful completion of the course results in enhanced job performance with respect to environmental health issues.
- The Midwest PHTC awarded 35 much needed scholarships to state and local public health professionals from Minnesota, Wisconsin and North Dakota to support enrollment in the core public health online courses and to assess their application of core course content in real practice.
- The New England PHTC developed *Foundations for Local Public Health Practice: Tools Needed to Get the Job Done*, in direct response to many requests from local public health workers, representatives of professional public health associations, local public health coalitions and

health department leadership from several states. This course offers a cross disciplinary perspective and serves as a solid foundation for other more advanced trainings in several important public health areas.

- The MidAtlantic PHTC offers PHASE (Public Health Applications for Student Experience), an organization that enables students to gain insight on how a degree in public health can be applied to careers and experiences in the “real world.” PHASE addresses the issue of the shortage of public health workers in health departments by providing health departments with much needed help from public health graduate students, while offering graduate students “real world” public health experience.
- The Northwest PHTC partners with expert faculty and workforce development staff in Alaska, Montana and Wyoming to plan and implement the Summer Institutes for Public Health Practice, at which over 400 public health workers gained new skills and knowledge in the areas of public health preparedness, management and leadership over the last three years.
- The Mid-America PHTC offers training for Board of Health members. Governance functions, politics and common political mistakes, and tools to increase effectiveness are all topics covered in the workshop, as is a case study exercise with an application to the Essential Public Health Services.



# Summary

The nation is facing not only routine challenges to the public's health — like a growing burden of chronic disease — but also unprecedented threats from emerging infectious diseases and domestic bioterrorism. Response to these new and re-emerging threats underscores the importance of ensuring a strong public health system infrastructure. More than before, workers in the nation's public health agencies and organizations need access to skills building, information technologies, and new science. Continued funding for the program remains uncertain, and several states and schools of public health have yet to be covered by the PHTC network. While the PHTC represent a national network established to assure that those needs are met, there is still substantial work that needs to be done if the PHTC program is to be sustained. For example:

- Despite their past efficiency and geographic reach, the benefits of PHTC products and services do not yet reach eight of the 50 states and Puerto Rico.
- In the absence of full funding, 28 of the 34 accredited schools of public health collaborate in the efforts of the existing 14 Public Health Training Centers.
- Congressional authorization for the PHTC completes its first five-year cycle in the coming year and reauthorization of funds is uncertain.



The PHTC program is a lever for raising the performance of public health workers and agencies nationwide. It brings together both academic expertise and professional experience. In order to maintain and build upon the work that has been done in public health workforce development, our nation's leaders must commit to sustaining the PHTC program. With continued funding, the PHTC program can expand its reach and provide foundational training to even more public health professionals.

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