

# Rising Stress and Burnout in Public Health

Results of a National Survey of the Public Health Workforce



## KEY FINDINGS:

More than half of public health employees report at least one symptom of **post-traumatic stress disorder**



Many public health workers, especially executives, report **bullying, threats, and harassment**

Nearly 1 in 3 public health employees say they are **considering leaving their organization within the next year**



Public health employees **are committed to their jobs and their communities**

Two years of COVID response have contributed to increased stress and burnout, as well post-traumatic stress symptoms, according to the Public Health Workforce Interests and Needs Survey (PH WINS), conducted between September 2021 and January 2022. At the same time, public health workers report that they remain committed to their jobs and communities. The survey by the de Beaumont Foundation and the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials collected the perceptions of nearly 45,000 staff in state and local government public health departments.

Conducted in 2014, 2017, and 2021, PH WINS is the only nationally representative survey of state and local government public health employees. The survey collects information on engagement and satisfaction, intent to leave, training needs, and public health's most pressing issues, as well as demographic information.

This research brief describes key findings from PH WINS 2021 related to satisfaction and engagement, mental health, and intent to leave. Additional data and analyses, including a methodological report, will be released in summer 2022 to provide a more detailed picture of the issues and needs of this vital workforce.



# Key Findings



More than one half of public health employees report at least one symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, and 1 in 5 report their mental health as either “fair” or “poor.”

The internal and external challenges the workforce has faced have taken a toll that will likely have lasting effects on the sustainability of the workforce and its capacity. The PH WINS survey included questions specifically about employees’ mental and emotional well-being. To measure the prevalence of probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the survey included a four-item checklist developed by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to screen for PTSD, the Primary Care PTSD Screen for DSM-IV.

In this screening, a person who reports having experienced three or more of these symptoms is considered to have probable PTSD. More than half of public health workers (56%) reported at least one of the symptoms, and 1 in 4 (25%) reported experiencing three or four symptoms, indicating probable PTSD.

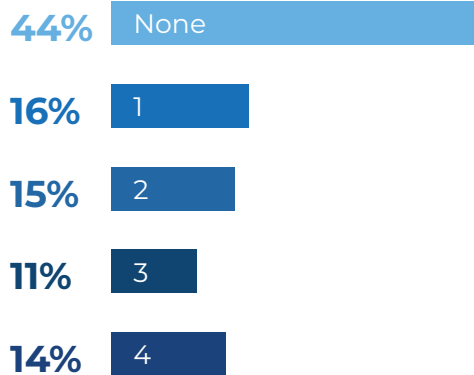


**56%**  
of public health workers reported at least one symptom of PTSD.

**Has the coronavirus or COVID-19 outbreak been so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that you:**

- Had nightmares about it or thought about it when you did not want to?
- Tried hard not to think about it, or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?
- Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?
- Felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?

**Number of reported post-traumatic stress symptoms**



Probable PTSD was more prevalent among those working in big-city departments\* (28%) than among those working in state health agencies (24%) or other local health departments (24%).

Among the state and local public health workforce, more than 1 in 5 employees (22%) rated their mental health as either “fair” or “poor.” Employees working in big-city public health departments reported worse mental health than employees in other types of public health departments. Across all agency types, executives reported worse mental health than other employees.

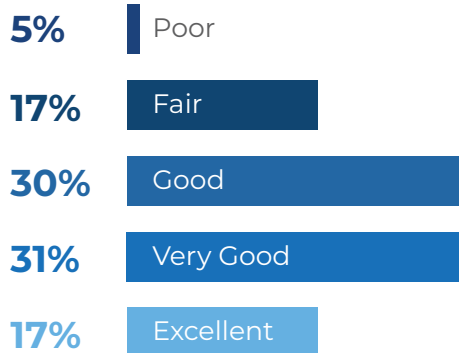
\*“Big-city health departments” refers specifically to the members of the Big Cities Health Coalition, composed of lead health officials from 29 of the largest U.S. cities. Responses from these departments are not included in the figures for “other medium to large local health departments.”



More than 1 in 5 employees rate their

**mental health as either “fair” or “poor”**

### In general, how would you rate your mental or emotional health?



Setting	% reporting “fair” or “poor” mental health
State health agency	22%
Big-city health department	25%
Other local health department	20%
Supervisory Status (nationally)	
Executives	24%
Supervisors & managers	22%
Non-supervisors	21%



### Many public health workers, especially executives, report bullying, threats, and harassment.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the jobs of state and local governmental public health agency workers, especially those identifying as executives, have been made more challenging by threats and harassment from the public and national and local advocates who opposed their guidance and decisions about the pandemic (including masking, social distancing, and vaccination.)

Presumably because of their more visible role, public health executives reported greater rates of bullying, threats, or harassment than other employees. Nearly 2 in 5 executives (41%) agreed with the statement “I have felt bullied, threatened, or harassed by individuals outside of the health department,” compared with 16% of the entire workforce.



**41%**

of public health executives:

*“I have felt bullied, threatened, or harassed by individuals outside of the health department.”*

Respondents also were asked if their expertise had been undermined or challenged by people outside their organization. As with the previous question, executives reported greater rates of being undermined or challenged than non-executives. More than 3 in 5 executives (59%) agreed with the statement “I have felt my public health expertise was undermined or challenged by individuals outside of the health department,” compared with 29% of all employees.



**59%**

of public health executives:

*“I have felt my public health expertise was undermined or challenged by individuals outside of the health department.”*

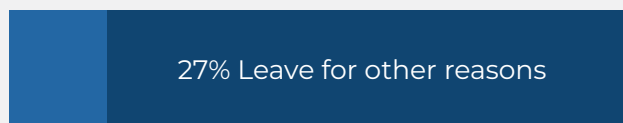
Supervisory Status (nationally)	Felt bullied, threatened, or harassed	Felt public health expertise was undermined
Executives	41%	59%
Supervisors & managers	18%	36%
Non-supervisors	14%	25%



## Nearly 1 in 3 public health employees say they are considering leaving their organization.

The negative effects of responding to the pandemic and outside stressors could have long-lasting effects on public health workers’ desire to remain in governmental public health. A preliminary analysis of all PH WINS participants revealed that from 2017 to 2021, the rate of employee turnover was two to three times higher than it was from 2014 to 2017. Additionally, PH WINS 2021 revealed that 32% of state and local employees said they are considering leaving their organization in the next year — 5% for retirement and 27% for other reasons. Looking further out, nearly half of all employees (44%) said they are planning on leaving or retiring in the next five years.

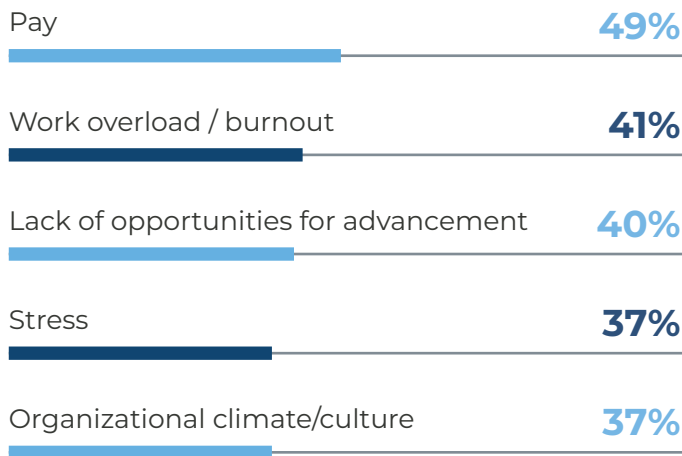
### CONSIDERING LEAVING WITHIN THE NEXT YEAR



5% Retire

Understanding employees' reasons for leaving is critical for improving recruitment and retention. Among the reasons most often cited by employees who said they are considering leaving were work overload/burnout (41%) and stress (37%), both of which were significantly higher than in 2017. Additionally, 39% of those considering leaving in the next year stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has made them more likely to leave.

### Top 5 Reasons for Leaving



**39%**

of employees who are considering leaving said the pandemic has made them more likely to leave.



### Public health employees remain committed to their jobs and their communities.

Despite the challenges that the public health workforce has confronted during the past two years, employees across state and local health departments remain dedicated to their work. Seventy-nine percent reported that they are satisfied with their job, and 68% reported they are satisfied with their organization.

Public health employees are committed to their work and recognize its value. More than 9 in 10 employees say their work is important and they are determined to give their best effort every day. Eighty-eight percent say they know how their work relates to their organization's goals and priorities.



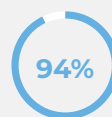
**79%**

Satisfied with job



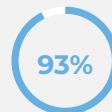
**68%**

Satisfied with organization



**94%**

"The work I do is important"



**93%**

"I am determined to give my best effort at work every day"

# Conclusion

Throughout the pandemic, much attention has been paid to the emotional toll on doctors, nurses, and other health care providers. The 2021 PH WINS report provides important data about staff in state and local government public health departments, who play a vital role in protecting communities from current, emerging, and chronic health challenges. Public health workers are the backbone of community health, providing critical services such as health education, disease monitoring and prevention, data analysis, disaster response, and maintenance of the safety of water and food supplies, including restaurants.

Adequate staff capacity is fundamental to providing vital services in every community -- and not just in times of emergency. Unfortunately, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, years of underfunding in public health made the nation more vulnerable to health threats and [weakened the nation's response](#) to COVID-19.

When PH WINS respondents were asked what they needed to effectively respond to the COVID-19 pandemic (aside from additional funding), more than half (51%) cited additional staff capacity. Continued underfunding of public health, combined with the high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover detailed in this brief, could have detrimental effects on the workforce's ability to meet the needs of the public for years to come.

The findings from PH WINS show that while a majority of public health workers are satisfied with their job, high rates of stress, burnout, and post-traumatic stress symptoms challenge that dedication. These trends should be a wake-up call for those responsible for ensuring the health of communities and the nation. Additional efforts to understand what motivates the workforce, their experiences, and reasons for turnover can inform evidence-based change to better support the workforce and improve the health of the public.

# Methodology

The PH WINS survey was distributed to 137,447 state and local governmental public health workers, representing 47 state health agencies, 29 big-city health departments, 157 other medium local health departments (serving a population between 25,000 and 250,000) and large departments (serving a population of more than 250,000), and, for the first time, 105 small local health departments. ("Big-city health departments" refers specifically to the members of the [Big Cities Health Coalition](#), composed of lead health officials from 29 of the largest U.S. cities. Responses from these big-city departments are not included in the figures for "other medium to large local health departments.") The survey was completed by 44,732 individuals, for a 32.5% response rate.

Through a partnership between the Region V Public Health Training Center and Northwest Center for Public Health Practice, PH WINS was able to include small local health departments in the Midwest and Pacific Northwest with a staff size of fewer than 25 or serving populations of fewer than 25,000. Approximately 2,000 of 3,000 small local health department employees completed the survey. Results from small local health departments are excluded from the nationally representative sample presented in this brief but will be included in the data and analyses that will be published in summer 2022.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PH WINS is conducted by the de Beaumont Foundation in partnership with the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials. Other partners include the Big Cities Health Coalition, the Region V Public Health Training Center, and the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice.

## Coming Soon

The complete results from PH WINS 2021, including data visualization dashboards, will be released in summer 2022. Other topics covered in the survey include:

- Experience responding to the COVID-19 pandemic
- Demographics of the workforce by age, ethnicity, gender, tenure, education, and more
- Workforce characteristics such as supervisory status, program area, and job type
- Training needs based on the recommended [Strategic Skills](#) for public health
- Ability to promote health equity and address other pressing issues in public health



[Sign up to be notified](#) as soon as the detailed results are available.

**de Beaumont**  
BOLD SOLUTIONS FOR HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES

### About the de Beaumont Foundation

Founded in 1998, the de Beaumont Foundation creates and invests in bold solutions that improve the health of communities across the country. The Foundation advances policy, builds partnerships, and strengthens public health to create communities where people can achieve their best possible health. For more information, visit [debeaumont.org](https://debeaumont.org).

**astho**<sup>™</sup>

### About ASTHO

ASTHO is the national nonprofit organization representing the public health agencies of the United States, the U.S. territories and Freely Associated States, and Washington, D.C., as well as the more than 100,000 public health professionals these agencies employ. ASTHO members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions, are dedicated to formulating and influencing sound public health policy and to ensuring excellence in public health practice. For more information, visit [astho.org](https://astho.org).