



## Funding for a School of Public Health in South Dakota

### Policy Recommendation:

**Support an effort to create and fund a graduate-level School of Public Health within the Board of Regents system, associated with the USD, SDSU, the University Center and Sanford School of Medicine.**

A master's degree in public health (MPH) degree is needed for South Dakota students interested in population and community health as a complement of study for the other professions directly involved in public health including nursing, medicine, social work, pharmacy, psychology, exercise and food science, and dentistry.

### Background:

In the early 1900s, public health in the United States, focused on improving sanitation, controlling infectious diseases, assuring the safety of food and the water supply, and providing immunizations to children through the efforts of a workforce composed mostly of physicians, nurses, and biological scientists (Brandt & Gardner, 2000). Today's public health challenges are much broader and often linked to personal behavior, lifestyle, and social environmental factors. *Healthy People 2010* and *HP2020* lays out a broad agenda for public health efforts aimed at increasing health-related quality of life and eliminating health disparities (U.S. DHHS, 2000). In an era when health threats range from environmental threats, contagious disease, pandemics, and the obesity epidemic, a viable public health system with a highly-trained workforce is crucial.

### Overview:

An effective public health structure requires well-educated public health professionals. Public health professionals receive education and training in a wide range of disciplines and work in many types of settings; however, all public health professionals share a focus on **population-level health**. A public health professional is defined as, "*a person educated in public health or a related discipline who is employed to improve health through a population focus*" (Gebbie, 1999).

Many institutional settings have a role in public health education including schools of public health, medicine nursing and local, and state and federal public health agencies. It is important that the education provided by these programs and institutions is based upon an ecological model of health. Such an approach requires a well-educated interdisciplinary cadre of public health professionals who understand the multiple determinants that affect health. MPH students graduate with competencies and skills which are expected to assist them in:

- Comprehending that successful interventions require the biological and behavioral effects along with social, environmental, and economic contexts
- Understanding that public health research must focus not only on secondary prevention and risk factor analysis, but also on;
  - The evaluation of public health systems, on practice approaches and interventions
  - Effective collaborations and partnership building with diverse communities
  - Possessing leadership, management, and supervisory abilities and aptitudes

As we move into the 21st century, it is important to identify and create ways to overcome new challenges to health, challenges that include scientific and technological advances, globalization and demographic changes.

Traditional core public health areas of epidemiology, biostatistics, environmental health, health administration and social and behavioral sciences are required along with eight more recent content areas: informatics, genomics, communication, cultural competence, community-based participatory research, global health, policy and law, and public health ethics. These areas are natural outgrowths that have evolved in response to ongoing social, economic, technological, and demographic changes.

### **Results from a workforce survey taken of over 280 South Dakota public health professionals in 2008.**

- 86% of professionals do not have a MPH or MS in Public Health/Health Education or allied field.
- 51% of public health workers have a Bachelor's degree in health education, biology, chemistry, exercise science or another associated discipline.
- 34% of respondents stated they were likely or very likely to engage in training/education on own time.
- Survey participants' preferred methods to gather this training and education were; on-site classroom (45.6%) setting, satellite broadcast/webcast (52.6%), self-directed web-based (48.8%).
- Top preferred education and training topics with a percentage of 50 or higher (in order):
  - Health behavior and health education theories (50.0%)
  - Research design and methods (55.6%)
  - Quality insurance and improvement to programming (58.1%)
  - Survey design and implementation (60.0%)
  - Qualitative research including focus group development (66.7%)
- 24% of all respondents were over 55 years of age (severity of the looming workforce shortage).

### **Conclusion:**

From the survey results above, the extent of the pending public health workforce shortage is alarming. Moreover, we can also glean from the responses, that the training and education most needed comes through advanced coursework, specializing in public health theory, research design methods, health behavior and education principles. This comprises the core curriculum to a Master's in Public Health degree.

Along with the knowledge of an ever increasing workforce shortage, aging population and compounded by a large proportion of disenfranchised people living in our rural state, we cannot afford to lose our passionate and dedicated public health professionals to other states offering degrees in public health. Access to advanced public health education in the state will reduce the likelihood that graduates will seek employment outside South Dakota once they complete their studies and ultimately, provide South Dakota with a capable professional working to increase the health of communities, families and individuals for the next century and beyond.

Brandt AM, Gardner M. 2000. *Antagonism and accommodation: interpreting the relationship between public health and medicine in the United States during the 20th Century*. American Journal of Public Health May 90(5):707–715.

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