



## APHL Position/Policy Statement

### Public Health Laboratory Workforce Shortage

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#### A. Statement of Position

It is essential that APHL support and strengthen the Nation's frail public health laboratory workforce without which the PHL system will not be able to provide the critical detection and surveillance testing needed for current and emerging health threats.

#### B. Background/Data Supporting Position

Public health laboratories across the nation are facing a workforce shortage. Since the 1980s, the number of clinical laboratory science degree programs has decreased by 50% and the number of hospitals sponsoring clinical laboratory internships has declined sharply. National trends indicate that laboratory vacancy rates exceed 20% and are increasing; the Bureau of Health Statistics predicts the current vacancy rates will double over the next decade (Reference 1). The number of retirements are on the rise in all categories of laboratory science, but the shortage is particularly acute in PHL settings.

Factors contributing to this workforce shortage include an aging workforce resulting in laboratorians retiring in record numbers; lagging salaries and compensation; the invisibility of the public health laboratory community when it is working well; lack of public understanding regarding the values and roles of the PHL; the poor image of PHLs and laboratorians; an impending leadership vacuum; and a shrinking pool of existing candidates both internally and externally. Existing workforce shortages were highlighted by the strain on the laboratory during the anthrax crisis in which personnel were quickly overwhelmed by the volume of testing samples.

Further, leadership and organizational management skill building opportunities for public health laboratory leaders are hard to find. In addition to general shortages in laboratory personnel, from 2002 – 2005 there was a 26% vacancy rate in state public health laboratory directors (PHLDs). This figure does not include attrition due to other reasons. During 2005 the APHL directory lists five acting or interim laboratory directors. One state has been recruiting for a public health laboratory director since 2002 (Reference 2). The PHLDs of the future will be challenged to acquire new skills and knowledge to effectively meet the ever evolving and increasingly complex laboratory requirements. Half of the PHLDs surveyed indicated that the current skill sets of the available candidate pool are inadequate to meet present and future needs (Reference 3).

In the past century, many achievements in public health can be attributed to PHLs fulfilling their traditional roles in disease detection, control and surveillance, food safety, environmental health protection and laboratory improvement. The extent to which PHLs can continue to make improvements in the health of the public greatly depends on having educated and experienced laboratory professionals. In order to meet these personnel requirements, PHLs must assure a sufficient and competent workforce by addressing training, salary, recruitment and retention issues.

#### C. References

1. US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics. Occupational Projections and Training Data, Bulletin 2542, Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, January 2002.
2. APHL 2004 Year in Review, March 2005.
3. Schoenfeld E, Banfield-Capers SY, and Mays G. Who Will Run America's Public Health Labs? Educating Future Laboratory Directors. Washington, DC: Association of Public Health Laboratories, February 2002.

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