The Public Health Laboratory Fellowship Program: an APHL-CDC Initiative was established in 2021 through the Enhancing Public Health Laboratory Capabilities and Increase Capacity cooperative agreement to help address gaps in the public health laboratory workforce and strengthen the pipeline of qualified laboratory professionals.

A focus of the Public Health Laboratory Fellowship Program is to promote diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEI) to help the public health laboratory workforce better reflect the diversity of the communities they serve. Host laboratories, such as the Missouri State Public Health Laboratory (MSPHL), have helped ensure the success of this by prioritizing a culture of inclusivity for their diverse fellows. MSPHL has over 120 employees across 13 units and became a host laboratory in February 2022. They currently have four public health laboratory fellow/mentor pairings: two working with infectious diseases, one with informatics and one with biosafety. The APHL Monitoring and Evaluation team interviewed two mentors and two fellows currently part of the program.

### Not Just Having a Seat At The Table

When talking about inclusion, one imagines a table of diverse faces around; however, it is not just about having a seat but also feeling comfortable and included. Jesus Mendoza, a first-generation student from the Acme Valley, a rural area in central Washington state, was MSPHL’s first fellow. Jesus says he embraces the concept of being “comfortable sitting in a seat that is meant for you even though others may not look like you,” and praises how much MSPHL has helped ensure that comfort is there. Jesus joined APHL’s DEI Task Force and has enjoyed his experience sitting in on board meetings, participating in book clubs and assisting with planning DEI initiatives in public health laboratories.

### From Chicago to Missouri: A Story of Inheriting Science

This program has opened opportunities for passionate scientists in their early stages of career. Another fellow, who came from the southern suburbs of Chicago, described his experience at MSPHL as “phenomenal.” He cherished how the Public Health Laboratory Fellowship Program gave him an opportunity to follow in his mother’s footsteps: “my mom was a first-generation college student who went to nursing school, and she very much imparted the love of biological science on me...[engaging] with APHL and CDC has been absolutely surreal.”

### Excitement, High Morale, Bigger Initiatives

A first-time mentor, and microbiologist of 32 years, conveyed that what he has enjoyed most about being a mentor is working with a fellow very different from him and witnessing her eagerness and excitement to learn. Another mentor observed how the fellows have helped improve the general culture of the laboratory and improve morale. He also noted that the Public Health Laboratory Fellowship Program helped lay the groundwork for other opportunities; after witnessing the success of the program with their first fellow, laboratory leaders decided to host three additional fellows, and they have also initiated a partnership with a local university to host interns.

According to fellows, both mentors and colleagues at MSPHL are supportive; they treat fellows as full-time employees, have open-door policies, are supportive of career goals and host social committee gatherings in and outside of work. Mentors have equally expressed how the atmosphere of comradery has supported both the mentors and fellows.

APHL aims to continue to establish and support public health laboratories in hosting fellows from diverse backgrounds, in hopes that the public health laboratory workforce will better reflect the communities they serve.

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