



ASSEMBLY MEMBER

Freddie Rodriguez

DISTRICT 52

FACT SHEET

Assembly Bill 240 (Rodriguez)
Local Health Department Workforce Assessment
As Introduced 01/13/2021

Summary

As California moves forward to recover from COVID-19, it is imperative that state policy makers re-examine how local public health departments are staffed and resourced. Assembly Bill (AB) 240 would require the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) to contract with an appropriate entity to evaluate and make recommendations on adequate staffing levels and infrastructure needs to ensure that local health departments can perform daily activities of prevention and public health and, during times of emergency, adequately flex to meet emergent community needs (such as during a pandemic). The bill would also require CDPH to convene an advisory group to oversee and provide technical assistance to the evaluating entity.

Background

Public health promotes and protects the health of people and the communities where they live, learn, work, and play. Local health departments are the first line of defense against public health threats, including novel pandemics, and rely on trained public health professionals such as epidemiologists, communicable disease investigators, public health nurses, laboratorians, and health educators. Through disease surveillance and tracking, public health staff monitor disease outbreaks so officials can rapidly identify and implement the most effective interventions. In response to pandemics, such as COVID-19, public health professionals must conduct rapid case identification and trace contacts for additional testing, isolation of cases, and quarantine of close contacts. Epidemiologists also amass databases for situational disease surveillance, risk assessment, and disease mapping.

California's local public health workforce faced the following challenges before the outbreak of COVID-19:

- Year after year of underfunding of federal, state, and local public agencies left the United States ill-prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trust for America's Health estimated in April 2019 that public health efforts nationally were underfunded by \$4.5 billion and that nationally 55,000 positions were eliminated from public health between 2008 and 2017.
- According to the California Future Healthcare Workforce Commission February 2019 report, the public health workforce in California is chronically underfunded, and most local public health agencies lack personnel with expertise in key areas such as epidemiology and the essential skills to design, implement, and evaluate comprehensive approaches to community health improvement.
- In California, both state and local public health agencies face increasing competition with the private sector, which provides higher pay, and amenities such as updated technology. Additionally, many public health leaders are nearing retirement.
- Many local health departments in California report challenges in recruiting and retaining well-qualified workers, citing a lack of tools for recruiting, limited options for advancement, and instability of funded positions. Public health nurses require additional education and certification, above and beyond what is required to become a registered nurse. Public health nurse certification fees in California increased by several hundred dollars recently.
- Rural areas of California face more difficulty recruiting the specialized staff required for

public health work. It is not uncommon for rural counties to have public health nurse recruitments open for several months and have no candidates apply.

The public health worker shortage has received little attention and there is not a focus on public health pipeline in California's higher education systems. Additionally, while public health work is rewarding, it is also quite challenging, and the difficulty of the work may lead to burn out in the public sector.

This Legislation

California needs to prepare for the workforce challenges facing public health – and for the next emergency or pandemic – by creating a comprehensive plan to address urgent workforce and resource needs of local public health departments. AB 240 will create a process to examine and make recommendations on addressing public health workforce issues.

Support

County Health Executives Association of California (CHEAC) (Co-Sponsors)
Health Officers Association of California (HOAC) (Co-Sponsors)

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