

Public Health Law Training for Future Public Health Practitioners

Summary Report



ChangeLabSolutions



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Introduction & Background

Public health law is defined as “the study of the legal powers and duties of the state to assure the conditions for people to be healthy . . . and the limitations on the power of the state to constrain the autonomy, privacy, liberty, proprietary, or other legally protected interests of individuals for protection or promotion of community health.”¹ Law is a key determinant of health and an essential tool for advancing health equity.² It has been a tool for improving health but has also been used to enable, sustain, and exacerbate deeply rooted inequities.³ Law establishes the foundation that underlies the public health system, and it can be used to address the fundamental drivers of health inequity and create conditions for community members to live safer and healthier lives.⁴

In order to be successful in tackling complex public health challenges and eliminating health inequities, public health practitioners need to understand both the crucial role of public health law in health equity and the relationship between the law and public health. The COVID-19 pandemic and the US socio-political environment have further emphasized the need for public health practitioners to develop equitable policy solutions. Moreover, state and local health departments have noted a need for further knowledge and skill development in public health law.⁵ However, there is a lack of curricula dedicated to the fundamentals of public health law and its impact on social determinants of health in the academic landscape that prepares public health practitioners to enter the workforce. Out of 190 accredited **schools and programs of public health** (SPPH) across the United States that offer a **master of public health** (MPH) degree, only 17% offer a course dedicated to public health law.

To better understand the gap in curriculum and the needs of state and local health departments, this report analyzes the findings from an environmental scan of law courses in SPPH and discusses possible strategies for preparing future public health students and workers in public health law. First, the report introduces the methods by which data were collected from SPPH and reveals significant challenges and barriers to including law courses in student curricula. Second, the results indicate that additional resources are needed for public health law trainings. Lastly, example activities are considered for strategizing how to improve public health curricula for future and current public health professionals.

Methods

The research findings from this report can be used to inform academic institutions about the benefits of standardizing public health law training for public health students entering the workforce. Here we discuss what the evidence suggests based on a multi-year assessment conducted by ChangeLab Solutions that included an environmental scan, data collection and analysis, and key informant interviews.

Environmental Scan & Data Collection

The environmental scan included 190 accredited graduate SPPH and entailed review and analysis of course descriptions, syllabi, and graduation requirements available publicly on school and program websites. Data collected in this scan were then analyzed for trends and themes. ChangeLab staff also reviewed existing competency models for public health students and professionals, including the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) Competencies & Accreditation Criteria. As part of the scan, courses were categorized by topic area:

- **Public health law** is the study of the legal powers and duties of our federal, state, tribal, local, and territorial governments to create the conditions for people to be healthy. It focuses on populations rather than individuals.
- **Health care law** involves facets of US law related to the health care system, including torts, employment, contracts, antitrust, and insurance that control the operations and functionality of the system, and may also include patients' rights.
- **Health law** is a catch-all for laws affecting health and the health care system but not public health. It generally covers individual patients' rights, which may include laws governing the health care system as well.

Key Informant Interviews

ChangeLab staff also conducted interviews with eight MPH faculty and administrators across the United States to assess opportunities, challenges, strategies, and recommendations for expanding public health law training opportunities in MPH programs. Interviewees represented a variety of geographic locations, teaching experiences, training, and school sizes. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed.

Findings

Public Health Law in Schools & Programs of Public Health

While the majority of public health schools and programs have at least one course that touches on public health law, the material is often broadly focused and is generally not required for graduation. Review of course descriptions and graduation requirements revealed the following facts:

- 58% (110 out of 190) of schools and programs assessed in the environmental scan offer at least one course that teaches **public health law, health care law, or health law** concepts at least at a broad level.
- 36% (68 out of 190) of the schools and programs have a course that specifically teaches public health law concepts at least at a broad level.
- 17% (33 out of 190) of the schools and programs have a course dedicated to public health law topics.
- Only 13 schools or programs have at least one course that addresses public health law topics that is required for graduation.

Of the schools and programs that offer at least one public health law, health care law, or health law course, ethics is the most popular topic addressed, followed by legal powers/ application of the law and advocacy/policy. Please refer to the [Appendix](#) for more data on course offerings and trends.

Course offerings that address public health law concepts largely depend on program size. For key informants who reported teaching public health law concepts, content was taught as a core course, an elective course, or a component of a course. However, only one participant indicated that a public health law-related course was a requirement for students. Key informants who taught in smaller MPH programs reported discussing public health law concepts through guest lecturers or as a small component of a policy-related course that often touched only on high-level concepts.

From both our environmental scan and our interviews, the data indicate that there is a lack of consistency in how or whether public health law concepts are integrated into MPH courses and program curricula. The inconsistency, however, represents a significant opportunity for SPPH to expand the public health law curriculum being offered to their students. Including additional public health law concepts would further the goal of making course content relevant to current events and the realities of today's public health practice.

Challenges & Barriers

Through our assessment of the data described earlier, as well as input provided by the key informants, we developed a more nuanced understanding of the factors that contribute to course selection and offerings in SPPH and identified key challenges and barriers:



Accreditation requirements & limited time

The Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH) establishes a set of criteria and core competencies that schools of public health and public health programs must meet in order to be accredited. Several interviewees noted that CEPH accreditation requirements strongly influence the curriculum for the courses that are taught.

Accreditation requirements are a driving factor in course offerings and prioritization and may leave little room for students and faculty to explore new topics like public health law. Key informants all identified CEPH accreditation as a significant factor influencing their ability to change a program or course; while it is a relatively easy process to develop or change an elective course, existing accreditation requirements take precedence over elective course offerings, especially for smaller programs. One participant suggested that having public health law concepts integrated into CEPH accreditation would be a significant motivator because if course content doesn't fit easily into CEPH requirements, it is difficult to add new public health law content while still including all other content that's required for accreditation.



Faculty expertise

Nearly all key informants mentioned faculty expertise to teach public health law-related courses as a limiting factor in offering public health law courses. Five key informants reported a lack of faculty with legal expertise as the most common barrier to incorporating public health law content. One participant explained that there are limited numbers of public health lawyers, and while a non-lawyer could teach public health law, it would be more difficult. In addition, that participant noted that smaller programs have a set of required courses that all students take as a cohort. They may lack access to someone who can teach the course or may not be financially able to hire an adjunct or other qualified faculty member.



Budgetary constraints

About a third of key informants mentioned budget constraints as a contributing factor in the development of public health law courses. Institutional policies often dictate that faculty dedicate a certain percentage of their time to teaching, research, or other university-related projects. Interviewers reported that there are often scant resources and support to allocate toward teaching and training in public health law concepts for faculty. In addition, one participant emphasized how little funding there is for grants for lawyers within a school of public health to develop or teach public health law courses.



Equity considerations

Any project focused on higher education is an opportunity to acknowledge and take intentional action to undo the historical legacy of structural racism in higher education. We continue to untangle the residual effects of discriminatory practices and policies within academia, from the passage of the Morrill Land Grant College Acts, which made higher education more accessible to students of color while concurrently further segregating college campuses, to the racial scrutiny of research agendas experienced by faculty of color, who are often evaluated by predominantly white senior faculty. This context can be considered as we attempt to expand training in public health law concepts. The feasibility of any option being considered to expand public health law content and course offerings - whether as part of CEPH accreditation or promotion of elective public health law courses - is largely based on an institution's monetary resources, which could leave smaller or less-well-resourced programs struggling to meet any new requirements.

As such, we hope that we can engage with a variety of educational settings and types of institutions over the course of this work. In addition, to support a diverse workforce best prepared to tackle health equity, we want to recognize the diversity of educational pathways that public health practitioners take and support them in gaining the skills and knowledge critical to addressing the public health issues of today.

Conclusions

Understanding the relationship between the law and public health is a core competency that public health practitioners need in order to work toward eliminating structural health inequities. Though this is true of myriad subjects taught in schools of public health, the legal landscape affecting public health is constantly evolving as our political climate, statutory authority, and case law change over time. This report supports the inclusion of prominent legal concepts that have been a focal point of many previous and existing public health emergencies, such as quarantining and isolation of individuals with highly contagious illnesses, vaccine accessibility and administration, and public education campaigns about harmful consumer products. Academic institutions can serve as an introduction to these concepts that are needed to improve health programs, interventions, policies, and outcomes.

Opportunities

Providing support to public health professionals at all career stages (from students to leaders) by advancing their ability to use law and policy solutions is an essential part of developing equitable solutions in partnership with communities. Our overarching goal for this project is to ensure that future public health practitioners understand the relationship between the law and public health. Ultimately, additional goals are that future public health practitioners are inspired to pursue further education and training in public health law or are well prepared to engage with the law and ask the right questions once they've entered the workforce. Based on the findings of this report, we have outlined four key opportunities in this section. The considerations listed here represent a multi-pronged approach that can support the standardization of public health law training for future public health practitioners. These considerations focus on having "AACED" the process of advancing public health law curriculum for future public health practitioners:

- **Alignment:** build support and align public health law priorities across stakeholders, organizations, and fields
- **Access:** increase access to public health law training for students
- **Capacity:** increase the capacity of public health schools, programs, and faculty to teach public health law
- **Educational Diversity:** increase access to public health training for non-MPH students



Alignment: *Build support and align priorities across stakeholders, organizations, and fields*

Increasing awareness of public health law's significance and value in educational settings, particularly among leaders, can help increase access to training in core public health law concepts in higher education. To address the challenge of inconsistency in how and whether public health law is integrated into MPH courses and program curricula, it is important to engage in and promote activities that help us build peer networks, make the case for public health law education in SPPH, establish consensus on what core public health law skills and knowledge are necessary for students, and engage with key stakeholders and partners. Key stakeholders and partners in this work include accrediting bodies, professional organizations and associations, and schools, as well as program leaders, administrators, faculty, and students.

Examples of possible activities to increase support

- Facilitate advisory groups of key stakeholders to inform strategic directions
- Integrate basic public health law concepts into existing course competency models
- Provide incentives for students interested in public health law
- Incorporate elements of public health law knowledge, skills, and experiences into policy-related positions



Access: *Increase access to public health law training for students*

The findings of this report highlight academic institutions' varying levels of readiness to expand training opportunities in public health law for MPH students. Providing opportunities and support, both inside and outside of classrooms, to integrate public health law concepts into MPH courses and programs can increase the capacity of programs to incorporate the topic and make the case for including basic public health law concepts in MPH and educational settings.

Examples of possible activities to increase access to public health law training

- Develop opportunities to integrate public health law concepts into practicums, internships, and other applied learning experiences
- Assess coordination opportunities in dual MPH/JD programs and identify opportunities for further collaboration
- Consider alternative academic opportunities within MPH programs to promote public health law concepts - such as certificates or concentration tracks
- Facilitate an advisory group for MPH faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders to inform the development of supportive resources and other strategies



Capacity: *Increase the capacity of schools, programs, and faculty to teach public health law*

To increase access to training in public health law concepts for MPH students, it is important to have simultaneous efforts to support MPH faculty in teaching public health law. The challenges related to faculty expertise in public health law can be alleviated by providing MPH faculty with access to training opportunities that ultimately will build their capacity to help students meet the public health workforce's needs.

Examples of possible activities to increase staff capacity

- Develop sample lesson plans and curriculum materials for MPH faculty
- Provide training materials for non-JD faculty on how to teach public health law concepts (e.g., webinars, videos, guides, and example databases) and develop a process for updating materials or helping instructors know how to verify whether the information is still up to date
- Organize a peer network, a work group, or a training institute for faculty interested in piloting public health law content
- Support increased funding for the study of public health law



Educational Diversity: *Increase access to public health law training for non-MPH students*

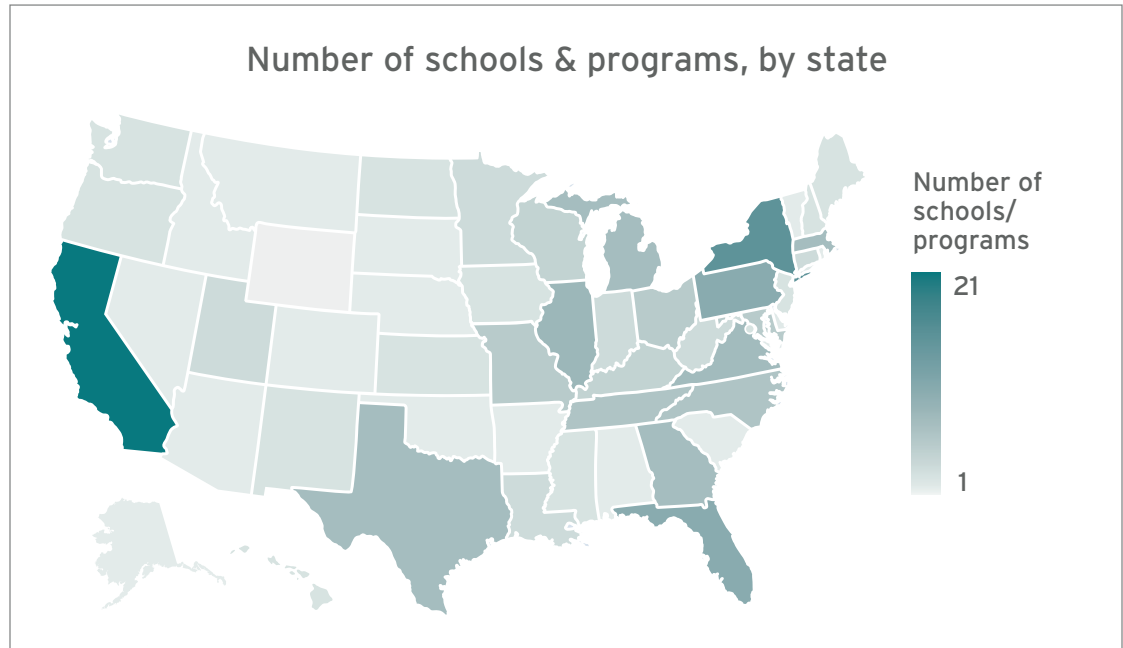
While MPH programs are an important training ground for future public health practitioners, only 16% of MPH graduates find their first employment in health departments.⁶ To address the need for training in core public health concepts across the population of future public health practitioners, we must look beyond graduate-level SPPH. In addition, by recognizing the diversity of educational pathways that public health practitioners take, we are supporting them in gaining the skills and knowledge that are critical to addressing today's public health issues.

Examples of possible activities to increase access to public health law training for non-MPH students

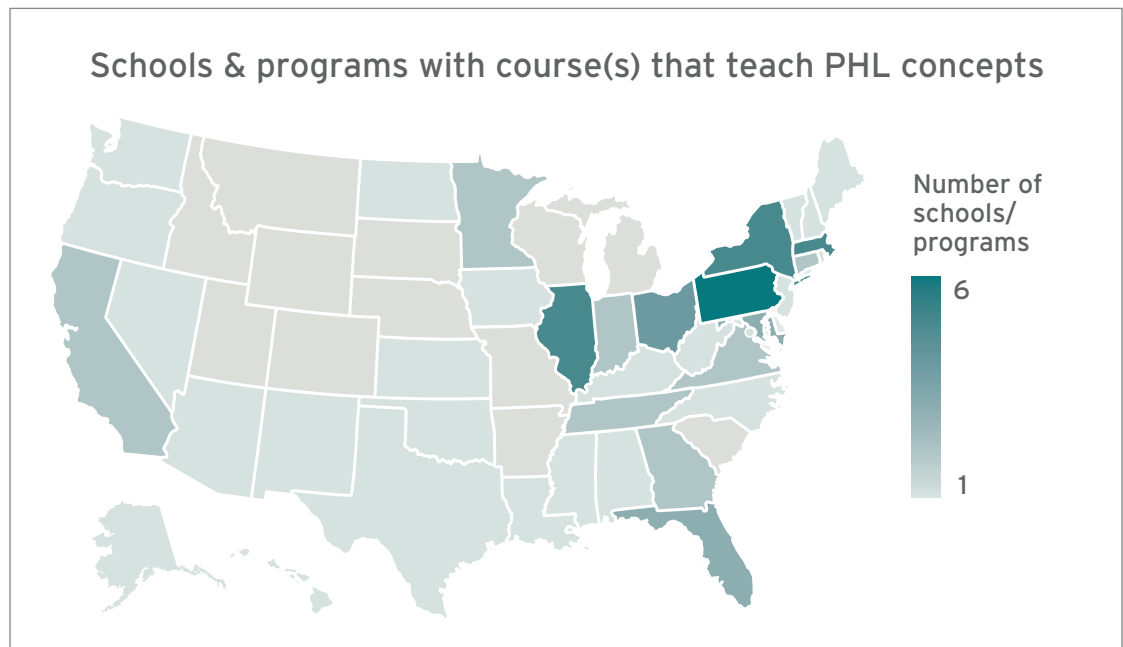
- Provide trainings, certificates, and webinars in educational settings other than MPH programs, including undergraduate public health programs, public policy programs, law schools, and community colleges

Appendix: Environmental Scan Data Detail

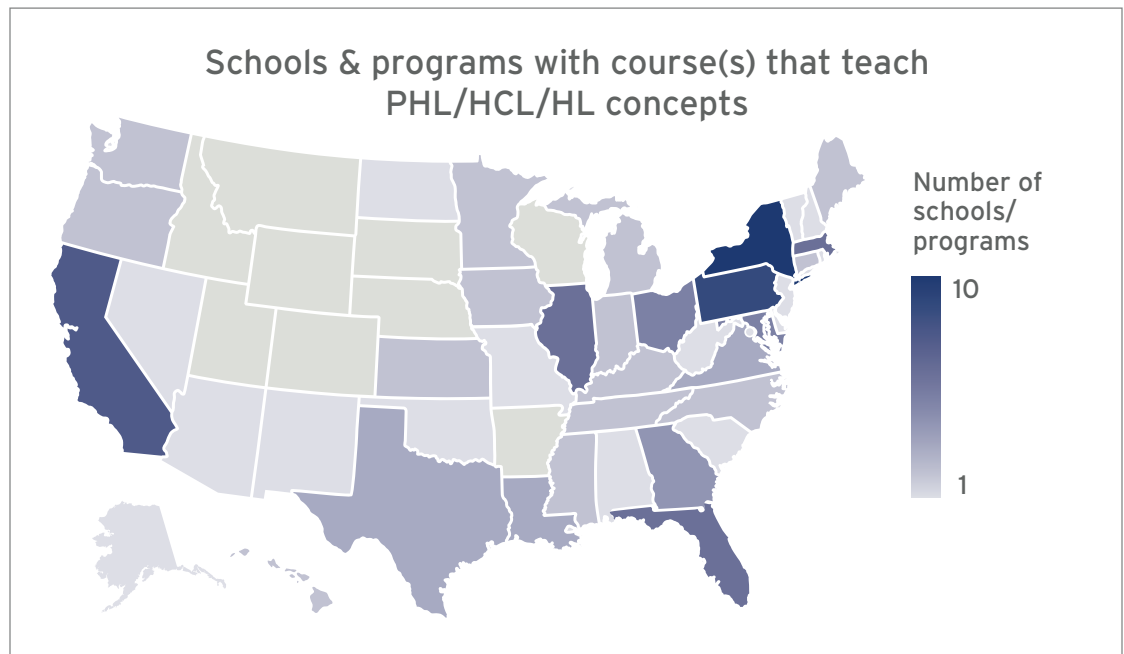
Map 1. We assessed a total of 62 schools of public health and 128 public health programs. There is at least one school or program in each of the 50 states, except Wyoming. California is the state with the most schools and programs (21), followed by New York (15), Florida (10), and Pennsylvania (10).



Map 2. There are 68 schools or programs that offer at least one class that covers public health law. (Note that these are not courses entirely dedicated to the topic; those are described in Map 4.) Pennsylvania had the most such schools or programs (6), followed by Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York, which all have 5 schools or programs.



Map 3. In our review of course descriptions and graduation requirements for the schools and programs, we found that about 58% (110 out of 190) of schools and programs assessed in the environmental scan offer at least one course that teaches public health law (PHL), health care law (HCL), and/or health law (HL) concepts at least at a broad level.



Map 4. About 36% (68 out of 190) of the schools and programs have a course that teaches PHL concepts at least at a broad level, and 17% (33 out of 190) of them have a course dedicated to PHL topics.

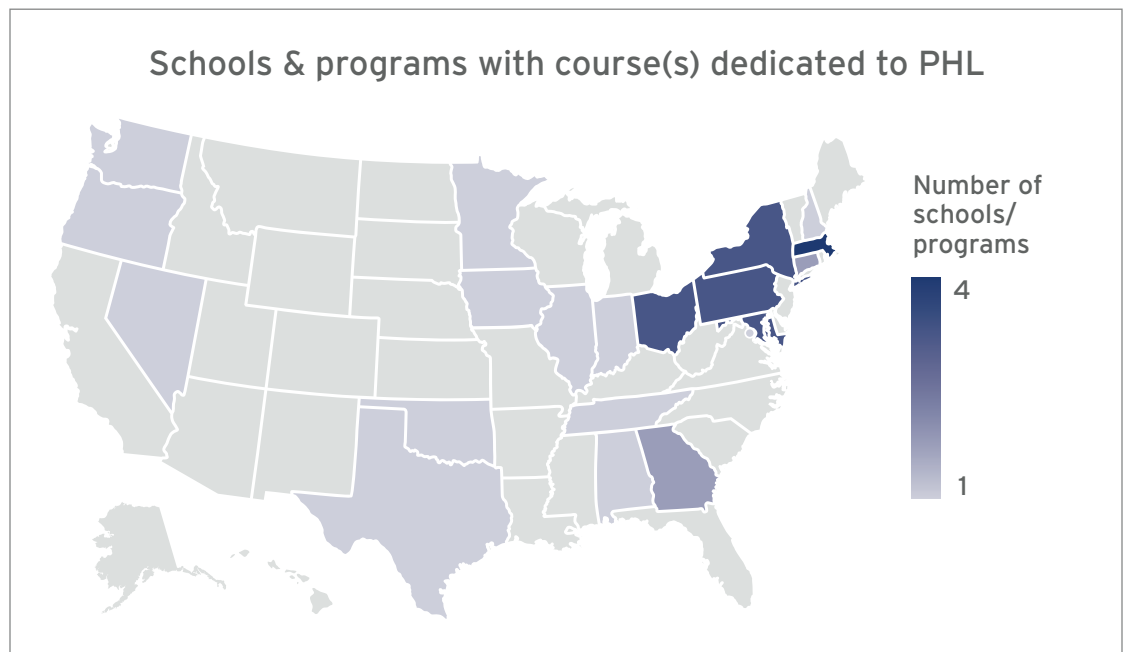


Table 1. Distribution of courses, topics, and requirements related to PHL, HCL, and/or HL in SPPH

Course description	Number	Percentage
Schools or programs with a PHL, HCL, and/or HL course	110	58% (110/190)
Schools or programs with a PHL course (addressed broadly)	68	36% (68/190)
Schools or programs with a PHL course (specific topic)	33	17% (33/190)
Schools or programs that require a PHL course	13	7% (13/190)

Table 2. Topics addressed in PHL/HCL/HL courses

Topic	Number of schools and programs with at least one PHL/HCL/HL course that addresses the topic
Ethics	46
Legal powers/application of law	43
Advocacy/policy	39
Public health law concepts	30
Health care	24
Social determinants of health (SDOH)	14
Other	9
Human rights	6

Table 3. Distribution of topics, by number of PHL/HCL/HL courses addressing these topics

Number of topics from Table 2 addressed in course offerings	Number of schools or programs that have a course on this topic							
	Ethics	Legal powers/application of law	Advocacy/policy	Public health law concepts/relationship between law and public health	Health care	SDOH	Other	Human rights
1	14	13	4	9	9	0	1	0
2-3	20	19	26	12	10	10	4	4
4-6	12	11	9	9	5	4	4	2

Table 4. Other spaces where public health law or related topics are addressed

Statistic	Number	Percentage
Schools or programs with dual MPH/JD program	56	29% (56/190)
Schools or programs with dual program and a PHL course	34	61% (34/56)
Schools or programs with a public health certificate program	10	5% (10/190)

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