

Kentucky Public Health Nurse Competencies

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Executive Summary

Today's public health workforce faces many new challenges that did not exist a half century ago. The American population has undergone changes in lifestyles, chronic diseases, and communicable diseases. New challenges include bioterrorism and emergency preparedness. A competent workforce is essential to rendering public health services in this ever-changing environment. The Kentucky Department for Public Health (KDPH) is working to assure competence among public health professionals throughout the state's local health department system. KDPH's Training Branch initiated Transition Training in Fall 2000 that included:

- Public Health 101
- Core Functions and Essential Services of Public Health
- Developing, Implementing, and Evaluating Health Department's Disaster Emergency Management Plans
- Documentation Can Be Your Best Friend or Your Worst Enemy

Along with these educational offerings, nurses formed a task force to discuss job description changes. The progress of this task force was significant, but was diverted by more urgent efforts to provide training in disaster preparedness and bioterrorism.

In April 2002, seven participants in the Kentucky Public Health Leadership Institute (KPHLI) expressed an interest in defining nursing competencies for local health department nurses. This Change Master Project group was comprised exclusively of public health nurses. Dialogues were initiated among the Change Master group, the Department for Public Health Local Personnel Branch and Training Branch, and the Department for Public Health Chief Nurse to review and discuss the accomplishments and current status of the task force. Proposed new job descriptions were examined. A review of nursing and public health literature was conducted.

Several group members attended the 2002 Kentucky Department for Public Health Fall Conference presentation by Kristine Gebbie, Dr.P.H., RN. Gebbie, a nationally recognized public health nurse leader who has made significant contributions in the area of public health nurse competencies as it relates to the Ten Essential Public Health Services, addressed public health workforce competency in a post-September 11 world.

The final product of this group's work is the development of the "Registered Nurse Initial Employment Competency Validation Checklist" (Checklist). This Checklist is designed as a tool to assure uniform competencies among newly hired public health nurses. The Checklist includes Core Functions of Public Health activities and links each function to one or more of the Ten Essential Services of Public Health.

A presentation regarding nursing competencies was delivered in February 2003 to the local health departments' Directors' of Nursing and Supervisors. The Checklist was favorably received, but evaluations revealed a need for implementation training. In April 2003, the Checklist and the final report were presented at the KPHLI graduation summit. Future plans include several presentations to local health departments and nursing faculty throughout the state. A Public Health Nursing brochure and poster presentation has been developed to further promote this project.

Kentucky Public Health Nurse Competencies

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, the services of the public health workforce in the local public health department have moved away from traditional public health into clinical services. The effect of this shift on the public health infrastructure has been well documented by a number of organizations including the landmark Institute of Medicine 1988 report. However, traditional public health education and practice is experiencing resurgence within the state and nation. While the majority of public health professionals are competent and prepared, there is an identified need for professional training and documentation of public health practice competencies in Kentucky and the nation.

In fact, there is currently no job description or set of core competencies for Kentucky's public health nurses. Instead, there are a number of community health nurse job descriptions with no standardized competencies. As early as the year 2000, Department for Public Health representatives met with the Kentucky Board of Nursing to address this issue. A workgroup of local and state health department nurses drafted a set of core competencies for public health nurses. While significant progress was made, the project was not completed at that time.

In 2002, this Kentucky Public Health Leadership Institute Change Master Group of scholars, with the cooperation of the Department for Public Health Public Health Nursing Branch and the Local Personnel Branch, proposed to draft a set of core public health nurse competencies. In May 2002, our group began working on this project.

Project Description

The project goal was to develop a public health nurse competency checklist that would reflect the public health nursing standards of the American Nurses Association and the goal of the Kentucky Board of Nursing to move from CEU-based to competency-based practice. These core competencies will be the basis for the development of the public health job description and performance evaluation. By relating the competencies to the Ten Essential Public Health Services, entry level and experienced public health nurses will have concrete examples of the relevance of these competencies to the provision of these services on a daily basis. This project will serve as the foundation of an on-going project for Kentucky's public health nurse workforce.

Objectives

The project objectives are as follows:

- Enable local health department nurses to demonstrate competency
- Provide a universal tool for nurses in public health to document competencies
- Allow local health department nurses to advance along a professional ladder based on performance evaluation and educational preparation.

Methodology

The group met once a month throughout the KPHLI year, beginning in May 2002. Initially, a meeting was conducted with other public health professionals who began the work on nursing competencies in the year 2000. A review of literature, including Internet search sources, internal drafts, and documents from the Department for Public Health related to this effort, was compiled. Based on their findings, the group decided to pursue efforts to develop a public health nurse competency tool. The group reviewed existing competency tools. Two competency checklists were drafted from the existing competency tools. Later revisions and combinations of the two checklists resulted in the final tool. A promotional brochure based on the public health nurse's role in the provision of the Ten Essential Public Health Services was refined and submitted for KDPH Chief Nurse's review.

Timeline:

- May 2002: Initial meeting between KPHLI Change Master group and KDPH staff
- June 2002: Shaker Town Summit. Met again later same month with members of Nursing Competencies Workgroup to discuss work that had already been done and resources available.
- July 2002: Met with Personnel Manager and Chief Nurse to discuss work in progress on transforming current nursing job descriptions into competency based.
- August 2002: Change master group met again to review resources and narrow focus of project.
- September 2002: Pine Mountain Summit. Set deadline for completing first draft of competency checklist for October 2002.
- October 2002: Attended conference presentation by Kristine Gebbie, Dr.P.H., RN. First draft of competency checklist complete.
- December 2002: QUAD Council releases Public Health Nurse Competency Statement for public review and comments.
- January 2003: Second draft of competency checklist complete. Group met, revised and combined the two existing checklists into one document.
- February 2003: General Butler Summit. Final draft of competency checklist completed. Public Health Nursing brochure completed. Presented project to DON meeting and acquired feedback.
- March 2003: Layout for poster presentation completed.
- April 2003: Poster finalized and printed. Presented project at KPHLI graduation.

Essential Public Health Services

The group's Change Master project is clearly represented by:

Essential Public Health Services #8

Assure a competent public health and personal healthcare workforce.

Of the Ten Essential Public Health Services, this is perhaps the most important. When the public health workforce is competent, the remaining essential services will be much more easily accomplished.

In 1990, the Kentucky Board of Nursing (KBN) released a statement regarding the move from Continuing Education Unit (CEU) based to competency-based practice for relicensure of the state's nurses. The KBN criteria for relicensure states, "That the protection of the public can best be accomplished through ensuring the competency of licensees who provide nursing care" (1997, Kentucky Board of Nursing.)

In an effort to address this move to competency-based practice and in light of the increasing emphasis on competency of the public health workforce, the KDPH Nursing Branch has begun focusing attention in this direction. Strategies directed to ensuring a competent KDPH nursing workforce include:

- Identifying core competencies for public health nursing,
- Developing competency based job descriptions
- Developing competency based performance evaluations
- Providing education on public health nursing competencies and evaluation tools for utilization with the public health nursing workforce.

Results

The outcome of this Change Master project was a competency checklist for the novice public health nurse. The goal was to develop a concise and applicable documentation tool for local health department staff to incorporate as a part of the public health nurse orientation process. This checklist will provide the documentation instrument for nursing competencies through the demonstration and application of knowledge and skills related to caring, critical thinking, communication, and clinical intervention expected for the nurse's practice role within the context of the public's health, welfare and safety (1996, Kentucky Board of Nursing). Also, the checklist will serve as a recruiting tool for colleges and universities that offer Bachelor of Science nursing degree programs. It will enumerate the fundamental knowledge and skills a public health nurse acquires through the public health nurse orientation.

Conclusions

Defining public health nursing competencies is a key component in assuring a competent workforce. The vision of this KPHLI work group is a revised job classification system based on competencies and public health nursing standards of practice.

Achievement of this vision relies on several strategies. The development of the Checklist is an initial step forward in enabling public health nurses to demonstrate and document basic public health nursing skills. Implementation will be dependent on acceptance from the Kentucky Department for Public Health Local Merit System and Local Health Department administrations. Several Directors of Nursing have already shown support for the tool and the incorporation of the concept of public health nurse competencies into practice.

Additional strategies will include incentive programs that encourage interest in professional development planning and /or continued education. This will require coordination with colleges and universities to provide flexible class schedules, offerings outside of the traditional classroom and consideration of work-related experiences for college course credit. Also, trainings for supervisory staff to enable them to meet minimal core competencies must be developed. This has been a dynamic project on which to work. Much has been accomplished in just one brief year. The group's vision was to create a project intervention that would have a positive impact on the public health profession. The full potential of the project will need more time to be fully achieved. Completion of this project will require cooperation between state, local health department administration and staff and academia.

Leadership Development Opportunities

Carla Baumann

Someone has said when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. This has been my experience with the Leadership Institute. The teacher was there in the form of my fellow scholars, the assigned readings, the on-line activities, the retreats, my public health director, and the staff that I work with every day. On every hand I had opportunities to see relevance and meaning between the KPHLI work and my work in the local public health department. The experience has changed and hopefully, helped strengthen my skills and knowledge so that I can better serve the public who have entrusted me with that task.

Carolyn J. Beaty

Participation in the KPHLI program has been an awesome learning experience that my staff and I will profit from daily in my work setting. The Summit speakers opened my mind to innovative ways of thinking and gave fresh ideas for methods of leadership. In reading several books on leadership I gained knowledge of different ways to approach my leadership role in our health department. My computer skills have been enhanced with participation in "virtual classrooms", Internet discussion groups, attempts at composing PowerPoint presentations, and frequent correspondence with my group. Gathering information for our change master project, "Public Health Nursing Competencies", provided opportunity for interaction with nursing colleagues as well as occasions to glean input from various authorities in public health. Another rewarding outcome has been the networking possible at the Summit gatherings and the friendships formed with colleagues in our individual groups. I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in a program that is certain to make a positive impact on public health in Kentucky.

Ruth R. Davis

KPHLI has provided an opportunity for growth both professionally and personally. Avenues for revisiting systems thinking, organizational structures and change have been rewarding. New knowledge has been introduced into the workplace environment and has been utilized to assist staff in coping with the continuous challenges facing public health. Also, the KPHLI experience has allowed a different setting for working with known colleagues and for opportunities to get

acquainted with new colleagues who share common goals of providing quality public health services for the citizens of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Joy Hoskins

KPHLI has truly afforded me the opportunity to develop my leadership skills in the public health field. Through self-evaluation and input from my peers and supervisors, my professional strengths and opportunities for growth were identified early in the session. Using this initial evaluation as my baseline, I'm able to see where I've grown over the last year, and other areas I still need to develop. Also, as a relative newcomer to public health, I've learned more about other disciplines within our state and local infrastructure, the Ten Essential Public Health Services, and best of all, I've had the good fortune to meet and work with six other public health nurses in our Change Master group. These women are professional, hard working, dedicated, and leaders in the public health field; they've been a pleasure to know. Through my KPHLI experiences over the past year, I have matured and enhanced my skills as a public health leader.

Jennifer Hunter

I have to say that the experience of the KPHLI has been the most fulfilling one I have ever had within a professional context. I never would have dreamed that I would have met, worked with, and bonded with the group of women that I have. They have made my life outlook a very positive one even if it did not have to do with nursing. It was refreshing to work with optimistic, motivated, intelligent nurses from numerous different backgrounds. We decided on a project and whittled away at mounds of information to create a product that we all believed in. I am so proud of what we have done not only for ourselves but also for our profession. I hope it makes a difference in the state of Kentucky for the nursing workforce.

I also have to comment on my KPHLI class as a whole. They have been so inspiring and I have enjoyed every time we have gotten together. From Cynthia to the assistants, to the speakers, all has made a difference in me. I have grown both personally and professionally through this experience and would recommend it to anyone!!!

Kimberlee J. Vanderbilt

Participation in KPHLI has further whetted my appetite to pursue a degree in Masters of Public Health. The concept of systems thinking has allowed me to look at situations another way and approach problem solving from a different and often times more effective perspective. The opportunity to potentially create change in my profession and my state has developed not only my communication, presentation and leadership skills and but also my overall confidence. This has translated to creation of a new job title that focuses on creating change in my community.

Delena Young

I have really enjoyed my experience with KPHLI. I feel I have been blessed to work with such a wonderful group of nurses so closely over the past year. I have learned a lot about the kind of

Public Health Nurse I want to be, and I have grown in my ability to think critically and problem solve. I feel my organizational skills have been refined, my willingness to take the lead in situations has improved and that I have been given the opportunity to work on a project that will make a positive impact on public health nursing. I have enjoyed the summits and getting to know my fellow KPHLI participants over the past year, and I will miss seeing everyone on a regular basis. Good luck to you all and I look forward to seeing you soon!

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