

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM. I'm Jim Burke, with local news and commentary for Wednesday, March 8, 2023.

WORKFORCE EXODUS – a story from Politico: We might be even less prepared for the next public health emergency than we were for the last one. After the billions of dollars on pandemic era upgrades to labs and data and surveillance, after all the studies and convenings and white papers about emergency preparedness, the U.S. still lacks two crucial things in the public health arsenal: People. And trust.

Without an adequate public health workforce, and without trust in those people and the work they do, the U.S. could get caught flat-footed once again. Two research papers published this week in the journal *Health Affairs* quantify what we more or less already knew. America's public health workforce is depleted. And Americans are a skeptical bunch; they don't have a huge amount of trust in public health nor its messengers, although the trust deficit may not be quite as deep as you've heard.

Brian Castrucci, a lead author of the workforce study and the president and CEO of the de Beaumont Foundation, which focuses on public health, said that unless something changes and fast, "Our health departments will be empty and no one will be paying attention until it is way too late." Amid low pay, long hours, cumbersome bureaucracy and, nowadays, abuse and threats so severe that researchers found huge numbers of public health workers had at least some symptoms of PTSD, public health workers are quitting in droves – and the exodus began even before COVID-19 made everything harder. Nearly half quit between 2017 and the end of 2021, and it's not just pandemic-exhausted older workers choosing early retirement. The under 35s are also fleeing. That means not just a loss of workers for now, but no pipeline for leaders of the future, which was pointed out by a worried Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, who said, "That knowledge base is going out the door."

The shortages in the public health sector aren't getting anywhere near as much attention as labor challenges in the health care system, itself. Doctors and nurses and others who take care of patients are of course important, said Castrucci. But letting public health erode leaves us vulnerable in different ways. Castrucci said, "It's like opening the gates that protect the army. If we don't have a strong public health system, there's no way we can have enough hospital beds to make up for the problems."

Fixes can't be piecemeal. Diseases cross state lines – as do toxic fumes from train wrecks, or the fallout from natural disasters. If even one state is unprepared, people in other states can be harmed. A big reason people don't stay in public health is money. Salaries are small. Bureaucracies are large. Since the pandemic, abuse has also been on the rise. And in more than half the states, lawmakers have curtailed public health experts' ability to make and carry out policies.

The distrust in public health has also made it a harder world to work in. Still, the degree of outright, hostile distrust might be overstated, said Gillian SteelFisher, a Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health researcher who led the trust study. Not many of the 4,200 people surveyed had really high trust. Only four-in-10 adults reported a great deal of trust in the CDC. For state and local public health departments, it dropped to one-in-three. But not many reported zero trust either. The haters on the fringe make a lot of noise and get a lot of attention, from the media and elsewhere. But the focus should be on reaching the tens of millions of Americans with some, but not a ton of trust. SteelFisher said, "You have to bring those people to the table."

This low trust, interestingly, didn't correspond with how well people thought the public health officials controlled the pandemic. It centered on the belief that federal public health decisions are politicized, not based purely on science, and that state and local officials do a poor job of communicating how people can protect themselves, with recommendations constantly changing in bewildering ways. Consistent and frequent

communication – including about uncertainty – can rebuild trust. SteelFisher said, “Here’s what we know today and we’ll be back here tomorrow. Inviting people into the process is the critical piece... We have to be trustworthy if we’re going to be trusted.”

I’d like to hear from our listeners: what is your level of trust in the Jefferson and Clallam County Public health departments? You can contact us through news@kptz.org.

There are links inside this article in the transcript of this program as well a link to the article itself (<https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2023/03/07/were-not-prepared-for-the-next-public-health-crisis-00085993>).

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org. This is Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.