

Why are Public Health and Public Safety Critical Public Health and Safety Team (PHAST) Partners?

The PHAST framework was developed to assist jurisdictions in reducing overdose deaths by supporting data-sharing activities and coordinated overdose prevention through multi-sector partnerships. One critical partnership is that between leadership from public health and public safety agencies. The PHAST toolkit provides guidance to jurisdictions on how to establish and formalize such partnerships. This section describes why public safety and public health are important partners in the overdose crisis.

Why is Public Health an Important PHAST Partner?

Public health professionals can be medical officers, program managers, researchers, data analysts, program evaluators, or leaders or directors at a health department. They may have clinical healthcare, research, data analysis, or evaluation experience. Public health professionals largely operate “behind the scenes,” researching and tracking risks and protective factors while working with partners to implement health and safety programs, policies, and interventions. In fact, leveraging partnerships with multiple sectors is one of public health’s essential strategies.¹ Through partnerships, researchers and scientists can track and monitor population-level health, disseminate health messages, implement and test programs and policies, and investigate and respond to public health threats. Many public health partners also hold the key to a valuable public health resource – population-level data. In addition, real-time data (as well as insights and observations) from a variety of sources are needed to continuously characterize, track, and adapt to an evolving public health threat, like the opioid overdose crisis.

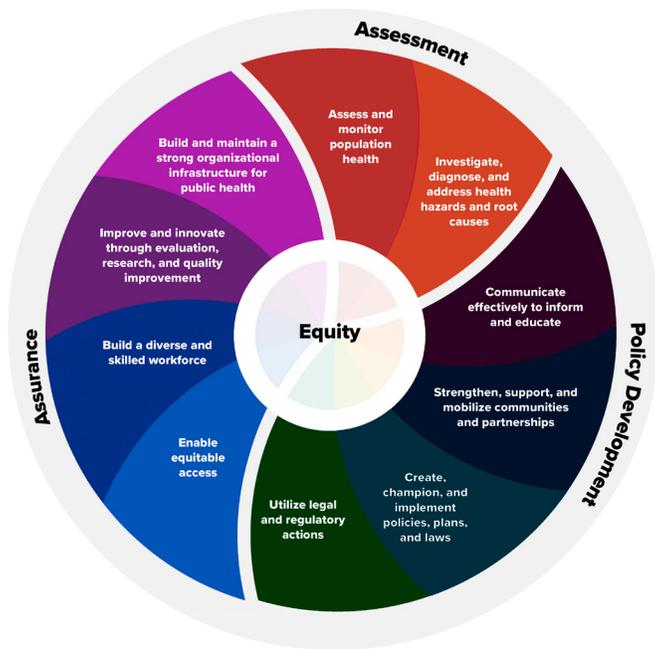
Public Health Skills, Services, and Strategies

Public health’s data-driven, scientific approach serves PHAST by ensuring that data interpretations, decisions, and response efforts are informed by the scientific literature and the best available data.

The strength of a public health system rests on its capacity to effectively deliver the 10 Essential Public Health Services:²

1. Assess and monitor population health.
2. Investigate, diagnose, and address health hazards and root causes.
3. Communicate effectively to inform and educate.
4. Strengthen, support, and mobilize communities and partnerships.
5. Create, champion, and implement policies, plans, and laws.
6. Utilize legal and regulatory actions.
7. Enable equitable access.
8. Build a diverse and skilled workforce.
9. Improve and innovate through evaluation, research, and quality improvement.
10. Build and maintain a strong organizational infrastructure for public health..

Figure 1. The 10 Essential Public Health Services



Whereas medical clinicians assess the health of an individual through examination and assessment of a patient, public health professionals focus on the collective health of a community’s population using a variety of data sources and techniques. As such, many are (or work closely with those who are) trained in scientific methods, data analysis, presentation, and interpretation. They also work closely with direct service providers to implement population-level interventions, including health education and risk communication campaigns as well as other disease or injury prevention strategies. Public health professionals rely heavily on partnerships with healthcare clinicians, community-based organizations, and many other service providers to conduct research and evaluation and to disseminate information and implement evidence-based practices and programs.

Public health also uses performance management strategies to regularly assess progress in meeting public health goals and objectives and identify improvement opportunities. By applying performance management to a PHAST, partners can determine the effectiveness of existing interventions, identify which programs, policies, and practices are moving them, as a group, closer to their desired outcomes, and make systematic improvements to advance health outcomes. This ongoing focus on measuring progress helps keep everyone focused on their common objectives and holds stakeholders accountable for their collective action.

Why is Public Safety an Important PHAST Partner?

Public safety encompasses law enforcement officials; criminal justice authorities, such as prosecutors, judges, and those working in correctional settings or in community corrections; and all first responder personnel, including police, fire, and paramedics. Its core mission includes the protection of the public. Historically, the law enforcement and criminal justice arms of public safety are known for enforcing laws designed to protect the public and issuing penalties to those who break the law. However, there are other contexts where public safety protects individuals, families, and the public absent an underlying criminal or law-breaking matter. Examples include the police role in managing individuals with mental illness or under the influence of drugs or alcohol. With these dual roles, public safety becomes more complicated and multi-dimensional. Specific to the current opioid overdose crisis, local law enforcement officials are among the first responders frequently called upon to respond to persons experiencing a suspected overdose.

Criminal justice authorities overseeing jails and prisons as well as community corrections (parole and probation) are responsible for people who may be at high risk of overdose; a study in North Carolina found that the risk for overdose death in the first two weeks after being released from a criminal justice setting is 40 times higher than someone in the general population.³ Professionals working within correctional settings must ensure the health and safety of the populations they serve. To fulfill this role, they need to know how to best serve people with opioid use disorder (OUD) while they are in their custody and how to help transition them out of custody.

Prosecutors also play a key role in public safety by working closely with law enforcement to try to curb the drug supply. Because many people who buy and sell or traffic drugs illegally are also living with substance use disorder, prosecutors' roles are multi-faceted. They often have much of the power deciding the fate of a person arrested for drug possession. This critical time can be leveraged to offer defendants health support and treatment as opposed to prosecution and punishment for behaviors that may be attributable to substance use disorders. Pre-booking diversion programs, such as the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD), first developed in Seattle-King County in 2011, have shown positive outcomes related to improved access to health and treatment services, housing, employment and education, reduced recidivism, and cost savings.^{4,5} The success of these programs relies on coordination with other sectors.

Law Enforcement Skills, Services, and Strategies

In general, compared to public health's essential strategies, law enforcement tactics are much more "operational," meaning they are actively service- and/or response-oriented. Five core operational strategies of modern law enforcement are: Preventive patrol, routine incident response, emergency response, criminal investigation, and problem solving/community-oriented policing.

- Preventive patrol is the showing of police presence as a deterrent to criminal activity (on the basis that criminals will not commit crimes in the presence of the police).
- Routine incident response is the attendance of police at everyday events, likely to involve no malicious intent, such as minor traffic accidents.
- Emergency response is the attendance by police at events at which there is an immediate and credible threat to life or property, such as an overdose.
- Criminal investigation is the process by which a trail of facts relating to an existing crime is amassed, often leading to an arrest of a person suspected of committing the crime in question.
- Problem solving, also known as community-oriented policing is the use of "organizational strategies [that] support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime."⁶

Endnotes

- 1 The Public Health System & the 10 Essential Public Health Services, accessed on February 7, 2020 at <https://www.cdc.gov/publichealthgateway/publichealthservices/essentialhealthservices.html>
- 2 The public health system: <https://www.cdc.gov/publichealthgateway/publichealthservices/essentialhealthservices.html>
- 3 Shabbar I. Ranapurwala et al. "Opioid Overdose Mortality Among Former North Carolina Inmates: 2000–2015", American Journal of Public Health 108, no. 9 (September 1, 2018):pp. 1207-1213.
- 4 Collins SE, Lonczak HS, Clifasefi SL. LEAD Program Evaluation: Recidivism Report (March 27, 2015). Harm Reduction Research and Treatment Lab, University of Washington – Harborview Medical Center.
- 5 Collins SE, Lonczak HS, Clifasefi SL. LEAD Program Evaluation: Criminal Justice and Legal System Utilization and Associated Costs (June 2, 2015). Harm Reduction Research and Treatment Lab, University of Washington – Harborview Medical Center. <https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/vets-to-cops/e030917193-CP-Defined.pdf>
- 6 COMPSTAT: ITS ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND FUTURE IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, Bureau of Justice Assistance (<https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/Publications/PERF-Compstat.pdf>)

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