



## The Virginia Public Health Association Case for Support

Connecting the  
Voices of Public  
Health to Improve  
the Health of All  
Virginians



## What is Public Health?

Public health is preventing disease, disability and injury and promoting good health within groups of people—from small communities to entire countries—through policy change, health services, public education and population-based interventions. It is one of the most vital professions and is absolutely essential to our society's ability to thrive.

The dramatic achievements of public health in the last century have improved our quality of life by increasing life expectancy, reducing infant and child mortality and eliminating or reducing many communicable diseases. Since 1900, the average life expectancy for Americans has increased by about 30 years. More than 25 of those years can be attributed to public health initiatives, while medical advances account for less than 4 years.<sup>1</sup>



In 1999, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention named the ten greatest public health achievements of the 20th century: vaccination, motor-vehicle safety, safer workplaces, control of infectious diseases, decline in deaths from coronary heart disease and stroke, safer and healthier foods, healthier mothers and babies, family planning, fluoridation of drinking water, and recognition of tobacco use as a health hazard.<sup>2</sup>

Yet while public health has made dramatic improvements in life expectancy, quality of life and safety, there are still major challenges we must address in our communities and our country. Our public health system is being asked to respond more frequently, from H1N1 flu outbreaks to preparing for public health emergencies to assuring safe and accessible transportation systems. Many communities have or will soon face shortages in nurses, doctors and public health workers. Too many people lack access to affordable and secure housing, nutritious food, clean air and water, and safe sidewalks, streets and playgrounds.

Disparities persist, with some ethnic minority populations having higher death rates for key health conditions. The U.S. infant mortality rate is higher than other developed countries, and this generation of children will be the first in 100 years to have a lower life expectancy than their parents due to obesity and its health impacts. Life expectancy in our country ranks 46th in the world. Tobacco use continues to be the single most preventable cause of disease, disability and death in the United States. Poor diet and physical activity are rapidly growing health risks. Climate change is creating new public health challenges, from changes in vector borne diseases to extreme weather events.

## Public Health in Virginia

Virginia has a mixed health record, and is ranked as the 21<sup>st</sup> overall healthiest state according to the 2012 America's Health Rankings. The state has a high infant mortality rate, with 7 deaths per 1,000 live births, leading to its ranking as 30<sup>th</sup>. There are also higher rates of adult obesity (29.2%) and diabetes (10.4%) than most other states, leading it to be ranked 35<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> respectively. The problem is even more stark when observed through the prism of race: 38.1% of non-Hispanic blacks are obese while for non-Hispanic whites the number is 25.1% and for Hispanics it is 24.1%; more Hispanics (27.4%) smoke than non-Hispanic blacks (18.0%) and non-Hispanic whites (17.9%); and a sedentary lifestyle is more prevalent among non-Hispanic blacks (30.8%) than non-Hispanic whites (20.7%).<sup>3</sup>



In federal funding for public health, Virginia ranks 41<sup>st</sup> for per capita funds from the Health Resources and Services Administration and 49<sup>th</sup> in per capita funding from the Centers for Disease Control.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Association of Schools of Public Health, [whatispublichealth.org](http://whatispublichealth.org)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> United Health Foundation's 2012 America's Health Rankings ([americashealthrankings.org](http://americashealthrankings.org))

<sup>4</sup> The Trust for America's Health, Investing in America's Health, April 2013.

It will take a robust and sustainable public health system to address these challenges, but the current and growing shortage of public health practitioners across the Commonwealth puts that system at risk. The 2011 Healthcare Workforce Data Findings reveal that our aging workforce is soon going to create critical shortages in many public health professions:

- The median age of licensed clinical social workers in Virginia’s workforce was 52. Over 40 percent were age 55 and over, and fewer than 20 percent were under age 40.
- The median age of Virginia’s licensed professional counselor workforce was 52. Over 40 percent were age 55 and over, and fewer than 25 percent were under age 40.
- The median age of Virginia’s physician workforce was 49. Over a third of physicians were age 55 and over, while another 29 percent were age 45 to 54.

There is a demonstrated need to create pathways into the public health workforce in the Commonwealth, especially for people of color and those who may be economically or geographically disadvantaged. As of June 2010 25% of the Virginia Department of Health workforce, or 901 individuals, were African-American. Of these individuals, 10.7% had a Master’s degree or higher, compared to 13.7% of their white co-workers. For those who had an Associate’s degree or higher, the disparity was even more marked: 40.7% of white employees claimed this level of education, while only 32.0% of black employees held a comparable degree.

The Healthcare Workforce Data further reveals that in the licensed social work profession 86% (2522 individuals) are white, while only 8% (234 individuals) are black. This data is mirrored in the professional counseling realm, with whites making up 88% (1720) of the current workforce, while only 7% (137) are black. Finally, within the physician labor force, 70% (9994) are white, while only 7% (984) are black.<sup>5</sup> This in a state where the self-identified black population composes 19.8% of the total population.<sup>6</sup>

With adequate funding, a strong, diverse and capable workforce with a focus on prevention and support for research and innovation, we can overcome health disparities and emerging risks, and continue improving health and life expectancy across the state and, by extension, around the world.



*“We know that young people everywhere are in the process of imagining something different than what has come before. Where there is war they imagine peace, where there is hunger they imagine people being able to feed themselves, where there is disease they imagine a public health system that works for everybody.”*

President Barack Obama

### **Leading the Way for Public Health in Virginia**

While no one organization or project can eliminate all of these problems and disparities, the Virginia Public Health Association is uniquely positioned to ensure good public health in our state, as well as serving as a strong link in the larger national and international network. Since 1950, we have worked to promote and protect the public's health through continuing education and professional development; annual meetings of the public health community; and advocating on behalf of good state and local public health policy and legislation. Our efforts continue today as we work with our partners to develop the highest quality public health workforce that reflects the diversity, both racial and

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Department of Health Professions Healthcare Workforce Data Center ([dhp.virginia.gov](http://dhp.virginia.gov))

<sup>6</sup> United States Census Bureau ([quickfacts.census.gov](http://quickfacts.census.gov))

geographic, of the state; build a strong independent voice for sound public health policies; eliminate health disparities; work to ensure access to healthcare and address other emerging issues.

Our mission is to promote and achieve significant improvements in public health practice and policy in the Commonwealth of Virginia. The association is committed to actively forming new partnerships, developing initiatives to support public health, and serving as a forum for all of the voices of public health in Virginia to be heard.

Recent activities have included:

- providing leadership and support in creating the Commonwealth Public Health Training Center, a statewide effort developed in partnership with the Virginia Department of Health, the Masters of Public Health Programs across Virginia, and all family medicine residency programs in the Commonwealth aimed at developing a highly trained public-health work force that is engaged, informed and highly capable of improving public health in the Commonwealth of Virginia;
- holding annual career fairs to inform nearly 400 individual students about career possibilities in public health;
- offering conferences on a variety of topics, from policy and environmental health to health equity and issues of aging populations, that have informed and educated over 500 individual participants;
- serving as an independent and trustworthy voice for public health issues in Virginia;
- developing and promoting effective and promising strategies through collaborative leadership for improving public health in Virginia, including partnering with the Virginia Rural Health Association and the Virginia Office of Minority Health and Health Equity to develop an updated State Rural Health Plan for Virginia after collecting input from over 1,000 individuals regarding the public health needs of rural Virginia's residents; and
- in recognition of the fact that some 28% of Virginia's population has a connection to the military, developing a conference, scheduled for the summer of 2014, in partnership with the Virginia Wounded Warrior Program of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services that will serve as a forum on the issues facing military service members, veterans and their families, and the implications for the public health, and the public health workforce, of Virginia.

The Virginia Public Health Association, with nearly 700 members and another 700 associates, represents a diverse group of professionals from many fields with the common purpose of protecting the health of a population. The public health workforce includes:

- Emergency responders
- Health educators and nutritionists
- Mental health workers
- Occupational health and safety professionals
- Public Health physicians and nurses
- Public policymakers and community planners
- Restaurant inspectors and sanitarians
- Scientists, researchers and academics



Their work, with the support of our association and partners, leads to:

- **Saving money and improving quality of life.** A healthy public gets sick less frequently and spends less money on health care, which means better economic productivity and an improved quality of life for everyone.
- **Helping children thrive.** Healthy kids attend school more often and perform better overall, and grow into healthy adults. Public health professionals strive to ensure that all kids grow up in a healthy environment with adequate resources, access to healthy and nutritious foods, healthy housing and comprehensive health care including dental and vision care.
- **Reducing human suffering.** Disease prevention and health promotion activities educate and make it easier for people to live healthy lifestyles and make the choices that help reduce cancer, heart disease and many other chronic illnesses. Public health also reduces the impact of disasters by preparing people for the effects of catastrophic events, such as hurricanes, tornadoes and terrorist attacks.

## Ensuring a Healthy Future for All Virginians

Now we must build on our track record, increase our impact and prepare to meet our state's growing public health needs. As in other states, our members are actively working to reduce infant mortality, tobacco use, obesity and other health risks, and to promote disease prevention and better health for all residents. Additionally, we are preparing for and responding to emerging issues such as bioterrorism and pandemic illnesses. We are doing all this within a population that includes large numbers of individuals who lack access to adequate, routine health care – particularly in our more rural communities. In the past ten years, the uninsured population of Virginia increased from 10.3% to 13.7% of the adult population.<sup>7</sup>



Over the next several years, VAPHA will continue working with our partners to:

- Help develop a first-rate diverse public health workforce that is connected, informed and highly capable of improving the public's health in Virginia.
- Introduce high school and undergraduate students to careers in public health.
- Offer the highest quality continuing education programs that will keep public health professionals informed in the broad areas of public health and allow them to achieve or maintain necessary certifications.
- Remain an independent trustworthy voice for public health in Virginia. While there are many organizations in Virginia that evaluate and recommend policy changes, there is no other non-governmental organization that does this for the entire scope of public health issues in a nonpartisan manner. The membership of VAPHA is diverse, representing a number of different public health arenas, and can be tapped for expertise on a range of public health issues. VAPHA stands as an unbiased, research-based voice for public health issues in Virginia.
- Promote effective and promising public health strategies through collaborative leadership. VAPHA can serve as a catalyst by encouraging partnerships to develop innovative initiatives to improve public health practice. VAPHA is proud to be a partner in the Commonwealth Public Health Training Center, which is aimed at developing a highly trained public-health work force. This Center includes a partnership of the state's graduate programs in public health, the Virginia Department of Health (VDH), and all family medicine residency programs in the Commonwealth. VAPHA was also a partner in the Vote and Vax clinics run by the Virginia Department of Health at selected polling locations in 2012 and is an active member of the Chronic Disease Collaborative Network.
- Increase our education outreach to the public to increase access to care, elevate efforts to prevent disease, and stimulate support for a strong public health infrastructure.
- Improve the infrastructure of VAPHA to better meet its mission and goals.

*“On several occasions, I have laid down a public marker, saying that if we pass a bill that greatly extends health insurance coverage but does nothing to create a dramatically **stronger prevention and public health infrastructure** and agenda, then we will have failed the American people.”*

Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA)

## The Right Organization to Advance Public Health

The Virginia Public Health Association is the right organization to champion and strengthen public health in our state. We have strong leadership from a committed board of public health professionals from across the state who are dedicated to establishing and protecting general health and wellness in the state of Virginia.

Through our committees, we have the active involvement of public health professionals from across the state, and a plan to increase our board and membership. Our members and partners cover all sectors including federal, state and municipal public agencies; non-profit providers; private sector health providers and related services and suppliers; educators; community advocates; and students.

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<sup>7</sup> United Health Foundation's 2012 America's Health Rankings ([americashealthrankings.org](http://americashealthrankings.org))

Our association is a member of the American Public Health Association (APHA), the oldest and most diverse organization of public health professionals in the world. Since 1872, APHA has worked to protect all Americans and their communities from preventable, serious health threats and to assure community-based health promotion and disease prevention activities and preventive health services are universally accessible in the United States. APHA has been a leading advocate for federal health funding and policy, raises national visibility for public health issues, and provides education and information services to strengthen the public health profession.

*“Much of the important work in public health happens at the local level, and the state and regional public health associations are at the forefront of that progress. They identify and address emerging issues, help build the public health infrastructure, and advocate for policy change that makes a difference. Their work creates healthier communities and a healthier nation.”*

Dr. Georges C. Benjamin,  
Executive Director, American Public Health Association

### **Please Join Us in Improving the Health of All Virginians**

To advance the public health of Virginia, we are committed to growing our association’s impact and ensuring our long-term viability by investing additional resources to fund our professional development, public education and policy efforts.

We seek to:

- Develop a partnership with Virginia’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Community College System in order to engage more minority and disadvantaged students in careers in public health.
- Support scholarships, facility usage and speaker expenses for future conferences focused on educating the public health workforce, such as the June 2014 Health on the Homefront Conference.
- Develop a nonpartisan structure that can educate and advocate for health in all policies, engaging the membership in the discussion and serving as a forum for all of the voices of public health in Virginia.
- Build additional partnerships in order to expand educational and communication efforts.

In 2013 grant funding from the Commonwealth Public Health Training Center made up 69% of the association’s annual budget, with the remainder coming from dues, conference registrations and Board support. Due to budget cuts from sequestration, the PHTC grant funding for 2014 has been cut by more than 80%, which will severely hamper the association’s efforts to offer educational programming.

To fund the critical programs and services that will meet Virginia’s public health needs, we must ensure a sustainable resource base for the association. You can help protect this crucial resource for the health and vitality of our state. Our state association offers many opportunities for funding, including:

- Gifts and grants that enable us to reach more members, provide more robust professional services, and address critical public health needs through general operating support
- Sponsorships and program-specific grants and gifts that support events, trainings, outreach initiatives and other programs that will allow us to continue building a first-rate public health workforce.

Please join us as a supporter of public health in Virginia. Your contribution will be leveraged by our membership dues and conference income; by contributions from other companies, foundations and individuals; and by the volunteer work of our members and partner organizations. Together, we will increase health access, prevent disease and illness, improve quality of life, advance health outcomes, develop a strong public health infrastructure, and ultimately create a stronger, healthier Commonwealth of Virginia.



Contact us at (804) 367-4860 or e-mail our administrator, Mary Kidd, at [mary.kidd@vapha.org](mailto:mary.kidd@vapha.org) with questions.

The Virginia Public Health Association  
2415-B Westwood Avenue, Richmond, VA 23230