

21st Century Public Health Transformation

KENTUCKY



Kentucky (officially the Commonwealth of Kentucky) is in the Southeastern region of the United States and has a population of 4.5 million people. The Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services is a superagency with a Department for Public Health and has a mixed relationship with local health departments in the state. Kentucky aims to improve the health and safety of people in Kentucky through prevention, promotion, and protection.

Transformation Approach

The effort to transform public health in Kentucky has been underway since 2014 and is led by the Kentucky Health Directors Association, with support from the Kentucky Public Health Association, local boards of health, the Foundation for a Healthy Kentucky, the Kentucky Office of Rural Health, and the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services Department for Public Health. The state health agency is a very proactive advocate for transformation and views these efforts as a public health system (state and local) issue.

The initial purpose for public health transformation was to establish a framework for local health departments to regain financial stability; however, the urgency to radically overhaul Kentucky's public health system stems from the necessity to improve the overall health of its citizens which consistently ranks among the poorest in the United States. Kentucky's public health transformation goals are to:

- Ensure equitable access to public health services across the state.
- Increase focus on population health.
- Promote fiscal responsibility.
- Strengthen collaboration and partnerships.
- Optimize internal capacity.

Transformation & Equity Activities

With the passage of [House Bill 129](#), public health transformation became law in 2020 and led to statutory amendments that categorized public health programs (KRS 211.185), emphasized local needs assessments (KRS 211.187), and established a new funding formula for local health departments (KRS 211.186). The five focus areas outlined in state statute include Population Health, Enforcement of Regulation, Emergency Preparedness and Response, Communicable Disease Control and Administrative, and Organization Infrastructure. In addition, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), the Health Access Nurturing Development Services (HANDS), and the Harm Reduction and Substance Use Disorder services are mandated. It has been determined that it will take 3 full-time equivalents (FTEs) per 15,000 population (with an additional FTE per 5,000 population) to do this work, and the current cost per FTE is \$109,000. This cost must be recalculated each two-year state budget cycle.

Despite the priority placed on current resources during the height of the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Kentucky recognized the need to continue efforts toward public health transformation. A transformation project team was named to manage the statewide planning initiative, including the revision of a strategic plan. Under the guidance of the project team, with assistance and commitment of Performance Management and Quality Improvement staff, it was determined that public health transformation would develop and promote initiatives necessary to advance the comprehensive overhaul of the state public health system. Key initiatives include:

- Public health transformation laws.
- Plan review, including the strategic plan.
- Program inventory and budget review.
- Organizational infrastructure and data management.

Health equity is integral to Kentucky's public health transformation and will be taken into consideration through all discussions, actions, and recommendations. Additionally, communication is fundamental to maintain transparency at all levels and ensure collaborative and cohesive messaging. Lastly, public health transformation supports a culture of change wherein everyone is encouraged to challenge the status quo and reach outside normal program delivery to explore new ways to offer services to improve health outcomes and health access.

Learnings & Next Steps

- Commitment of resources, especially through WFD/COVID grants, to support building a public health workforce around public health transformation/foundational services and programs.
- Assessment of existing programs at both the state and local level to determine the impact of public health transformation.
- Development of consistent messaging as it relates to the who, what, where, and why of public health transformation.
- Increased and formalized input from local health department leadership and staff in assessment and decision-making.

Recommendations & Call to Action

- It is important to establish public health transformation as a priority (i.e. commitment of resources) from senior leadership – both at the state and local levels and to empower state and local staff to work together to challenge the status quo. PHT is a statewide initiative.
- It is important to provide consistent and continuous messaging regarding public health transformation, both as a change management culture and a tool in strategic planning.

“Public health transformation is not only important but necessary in redefining public health’s role to acknowledge the social determinants of health and work collaboratively to remove barriers so individuals, families, and communities can achieve optimal health.”