

The Invisible Nursing Workforce – Public Health Nurses (PHNs)

Who are Public Health Nurses (PHNs)? What are they doing during COVID–19 pandemic? Colorado PHNs are doing what they are prepared to do and have focused on their entire career! PHNs must be prepared to respond directly to public health crises; from a community disease outbreak to natural disasters, and yes; the COVID-19 pandemic. The tenets of emergency preparedness are a necessary competency and second nature for a PHN. Their roles are diverse, challenging, and require strong clinical and clinical thinking skills. They apply their broad nursing expertise to partner with communities to promote and protect the health of populations. The social determinants of health and health disparities are the everyday focus of a PHN.

Public health nursing (PHN) is a specialty practice within nursing, public health, and the health care system to improve the health of the world's people. Their scope of practice is directed toward health promotion and primary prevention through assessment, assurance, and policy development in our communities. PHNs' focus is on the health needs of an entire population, including inequities and the unique needs of sub-populations. PHNs are among the frontline responders to public health crises or disasters.

During the current pandemic, PHNs have provided essential and critical support to provide health information, resources, and services to healthcare systems throughout Colorado. This has included staffing public health call centers in local and state health departments to calm, educate, assist callers to find community test sites, food banks, and employment resources. The list continues. In addition, PHNs have continued their usual roles in immunization clinics, home visitation programs, HIV and STI outreach and treatment, non-COVID communicable disease investigation, and family planning clinics. Currently, contact tracing is a critical responsibility of the Public Health system, and PHNs are often playing a leading planning and management role in those activities.

The practice of Public Health Nursing is often difficult for nurses working in acute care to relate to, but a “nurse is a nurse, is a nurse!” PHNs are the backbone for the Colorado public health workforce, and face the same shortage now and in the future as all of the national nursing workforce. If you would like to know more about Public Health Nursing go to <https://www.phnurse.org/> or <https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/workforce/public-health-nursing/>.

Yes, PHNs may seem invisible, but their community knows who they are. Public Health Nursing practice and leadership are the backbone of public health, supporting the mission of improving conditions and behaviors that affect health. We are in this together!

The Association of Public Health Nurses annual conference will be held in Denver, April 19-22, 2021. We invite all nursing professionals throughout Colorado to consider attending.