



State Civil Service Systems and Their Impacts on State Health Agency Workforce Planning: 2022 Environmental Scan

Civil service systems, originally put in place to protect workers and provide useful structures, can present barriers to rapid, efficient, and equitable hiring practices, and limit an agency's ability to be nimble in response to shifting workforce needs.

The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), on behalf of the de Beaumont Foundation, conducted an environmental scan of the landscape of state civil systems that included an assessment of select workforce development plans from accredited state health agencies.

The scan revealed a dearth of evidence regarding state civil service systems' impact on human resource and workforce development functions. Comprehensive research to summarize the differences between state civil service systems would provide new evidence for addressing the workforce barriers.

The National Consortium of Public Health Workforce Development — of which de Beaumont Foundation and ASTHO — are both members — can serve as facilitators for or contributors to such research and could help state health agencies (SHAs) to pursue strategies to modernize processes and overcome barriers based on the recommendations of public health workforce experts and advocates.

Environmental Scan Protocol and Methods

ASTHO conducted a literature review to identify existing evidence regarding the link between civil service systems, workforce planning, and the following key topics:

- Varying definitions of “civil service”
- Civil service examination requirements
- Job descriptions and requirements
- Full-time Equivalents (FTE) and compensation
- Public health accreditation and workforce administration



How is “civil service” defined?

A barrier to studying the impact of civil service systems on public health workforce planning is the wide range of definitions for “civil service” across states, within governments (e.g., executive agencies vs. budget offices), and by organizations outside of state government, such as labor unions.

The wide range of terminology used to describe civil service systems, their beneficiaries, and their processes is an additional barrier.

How do civil service exam requirements differ across states?

Exam requirements — “merit-based recruitment” — differ across states. (As of 2019, only half of U.S. states still require civil service exams for recruitment.) For those states that require exams, what constitutes an exam also varies.

Efforts to reform exam requirements fall under a few categories. The first is removing exams from the hiring process, either in full or in part. A second is more flexible alternatives to ranked written exams, such as pass/fail or other categorical or hierarchical “banding” of candidates. Some reforms focus on accessibility, such as increasing flexibility in scheduling or offering exemptions for specific groups like veterans or persons with disabilities.

How do civil service requirements dictate job descriptions and minimum qualifications?

Outdated, rigid, and unappealing job descriptions and requirements are barriers to state public health workforce planning, but it is unclear from existing literature whether these practices are a direct result of merit-based recruitment. Regardless, the rigidity of minimum qualifications and inconsistency in job requirements across government public health job listings deter candidates from pursuing these positions.

There are several ways to modernize job descriptions. One is to highlight the positive impacts of government public health roles, limit the use of business-oriented lingo, and avoid over-describing the role’s responsibilities. Another is to make minimum requirements — prior field experience, degrees, software competencies, residency — less rigid. Finally, removing outdated physical job requirements can also make a job description more appealing and accessible.



How do centralized controls on FTEs and compensation impact recruitment and retention?

While unemployment among the public sector workforce has risen during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is no evidence that this is a direct result of FTE caps. In addition, we found no examples of the direct impact of FTE caps on state health agency recruitment or retention. However, there was evidence that pay policies have an indirect effect on recruitment and retention. Studies of public health graduates identified perceived limits on government public health salaries as a deterrent.

Recent and proposed reforms have focused on making state public health salaries more competitive. Some states have tied increased salaries to revocation of civil service protections. At the federal level, agencies have expanded eligibility for retention bonuses. Advocates also believe in the need to update the government's pay classification system to make it more occupation- and market-sensitive.

Examination of Workforce Development Plans

For the purposes of this review, we reviewed Workforce Development Plans (WDPs) from eight accredited state health agencies. Only one of the eight WDPs directly mentioned civil service, the merit system, classified employees, or the competitive service.

Most states named at least one strategy to address barriers that civil service rules and processes can present. Two of the eight WDPs indicated an intention to improve the hiring process. Another state included shortening hiring time as an objective. Strategies included developing new hiring and training modules and implementing a "10-day rule" between each step of the hiring process.

Internship programs can help build the entry level workforce pathway by increasing the likelihood of public health graduates choosing governmental public health roles over private and nonprofit competitors. Six of the eight WDPs cited an intention to improve or expand its internship program.

Student loan forgiveness benefits are often proposed as a tactic for incentivizing public health graduates to choose governmental public health. Some evidence suggests state health agencies have considered pursuing or expanding such incentives, but none of the eight WDPs reviewed in this environmental scan mentioned loan forgiveness policies.