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# Report: Epidemiologists in short supply at city health departments

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Better pay and benefits are needed to spur recruitment of epidemiologists, a report says

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Epidemiologists have been at the forefront of the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic, sharing important findings with policymakers. But despite their important role during emergencies and regular public health work, health departments in large cities in the U.S. are experiencing a shortage of epidemiologists, a recent report finds.

The report, released in February by the Big Cities Health Coalition and Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists, surveyed 26 of the nation's largest urban health departments, finding nearly 200 positions open.

Although epidemiologist shortages existed before COVID-19, the pandemic exacerbated the problem, according to Mysheika Roberts, MD, MPH, health commissioner for Columbus, Ohio.

“The past two years have put a tremendous toll on public health,” Roberts said during a briefing on the report. “I think everyone knows that public health departments of all sizes have been stretched very thin as a result of responding to this pandemic.”

To meet their needs, health departments would need to increase their epidemiological staff by 47%, said Chrissie Juliano, MPP, who is executive director of the Big Cities Health Coalition and co-author of the study.

Enough public health students are graduating with epidemiology degrees to fill those roles, she said, but big city health departments are struggling to recruit them because of tight budgets.

The report said that state and federal health departments oftentimes have better funding than city health departments. They generally receive 35% of funding from local sources, with 30% coming from federal and state sources, and 25% from temporary COVID-19 federal funding.

“Emergency COVID-19 funding is going to disappear soon,” Roberts said. “The money that many of us did receive from our cities, mayors or state is dwindling and that’s presenting yet another funding cliff for many of us.”

Because of constantly-shifting pandemic needs, report authors said health departments should train their epidemiologists in multiple disciplines so they can shift their focus to other public health issues when needed.

The COVID-19 workload has also led to burnout among epidemiologists. To address this, competitive salaries and better benefits are needed, the report said.

“Everybody is tired and now we need to figure out how we continue to respond to this phase of COVID-19,” Juliano said.

Although all the report’s recommendations are important, Roberts said, increasing federal funding would be the most impactful measure to alleviate issues facing health departments in large urban areas.

“We must ensure that every health department...has the resources they need to protect the health and safety of our communities that we all serve so very proudly,” she said.

For more information on “Big Cities Health Coalition Epidemiology Capacity Assessment, 2021,” visit [www.bigcitieshealth.org](http://www.bigcitieshealth.org).

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