

Employee Recruitment and Retention in Local Health Jurisdictions in Washington State: A qualitative inquiry

The Full Report

May, 2007

The Washington State Public Health Improvement Plan
Workforce Development Committee
The Washington State Department of Health, Office of Public
Health System Planning and Development

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Executive Summary

As a follow up to Washington State's 2004 public health workforce enumeration and a way to expand our understanding of workforce recruitment and retention issues, the PHIP Workforce Development Committee with assistance from a University of Washington graduate student conducted a qualitative analysis of twenty key informant interviews with leaders in local health jurisdictions. The twenty interviews provided a wealth of information which the project team analyzed and organized into themes, experiences, and recommendations. The findings and discussion are available in this report.

Specific issues that have a strong affect on workforce recruitment and retention include salaries, benefits and opportunities for promotion. They are certainly not the only factors that are significant. Other factors such as workplace environment, and organizational preparation and policy are also important. This report explores those themes and others to create a picture of local public health workforce recruitment and retention in Washington.

Generally we found that in local public health, workforce recruitment and retention are multifaceted issues. Especially because of the decentralized nature of the public health system in the state, local health jurisdictions have varied practices, challenges, and solutions. As a result, the recommendations that emerged from the analysis are wide-ranging and numerous. Furthermore, since the recommendations are varied and the state's local health jurisdictions are diverse, the recommendations are not necessarily applicable in all settings.

Important recommendations for local health jurisdictions that grew out of the information from the interviews include:

- Improving planning and policy for workforce recruitment and retention,
- Keeping records and evaluating internal processes,
- Offering workforce development and training opportunities,
- Using approaches to recruitment and retention that are not resource intensive,
- Improving knowledge and technology use,
- Marketing job and workplace strengths to the public,
- Developing relationships with educational institutions and communities,
- Beginning a process of change and improvement.

The report contains numerous other recommendations. Hopefully the information presented here will be useful to local health jurisdictions, as well as to the Washington State Department of Health and the PHIP Workforce Development Committee. This report intends to add another building block in the foundation needed we need to improve public health workforce recruitment and retention in Washington.

I. INTRODUCTION

While the 2004 public health workforce enumeration (Everybody Counts) provides useful information about the current state public health workforce, it does not contain information about recruitment and retention practices and challenges. The Public Health Improvement Partnership (PHIP) Workforce Development Committee, the Washington State Department of Health, and a University of Washington School of Public Health and Community Medicine graduate student have worked together to further assess public health workforce issues in Washington. The **purpose** of this project is two-fold: to build on current knowledge of the scope of public health workforce recruitment and retention issues among local health jurisdictions (LHJs) in Washington and to identify and share effective practices associated with workforce recruitment and retention among LHJs.

Recruitment in this report refers to the set of activities LHJs conduct to attract qualified candidates in their organizations. LHJ recruitment activities include developing relationships with educational institutions, advertising job vacancies, contacting candidates, and screening candidates. Also included within the concept of recruitment for the purposes of this report are candidate selection activities, such as the application process, interviewing, and hiring. Retention refers to the set of activities LHJs conduct to keep qualified employees on staff.

Because the Workforce Development Committee was not aware of the breadth of practices, successes, and challenges that LHJs experience as they work to attract new employees and to maintain their experienced staff, they employed a qualitative method for this project. In August and September of 2006, the graduate student interviewer conducted key informant interviews with different LHJs across the state.

Overview of 20 Washington LHJs Interviewed

<u>size*</u>	<u>location</u>	<u>type</u>
Small – 9	East – 10	Dept – 13
Mid – 4	West – 10	Dist – 7
Large – 2		
Very Large – 5		

Agency leaders from twenty of the 35 LHJs in Washington participated. The sample is made up of various sizes of health departments and districts from the east and west. Of the LHJs that participated, half were self-selected. The interviewer recruited the second half of LHJs on the basis of their size, location, and type in order to have a varied distribution of LHJs. All participated voluntarily. In each LHJ, the interviewer spoke to either the Administrator, the Director, or to a human resources manager. The interviews were 40-60 minute conversations based on an interview guide that the interviewer sent to each interviewee in advance (see attachment). One interviewer conducted all the interviews and took notes to record the conversations.

* LHJ “size” refers to the county population. Small <70,000. Medium =70,000 – 150,000. Large =150,000 – 250,000. Very Large >250,000.

Caveats

To some extent, the responses differed depending on whether the project staff spoke to an administrator, a director, or a human resources manager. Because the interviewees were assigned codes, when project staff analyzed results, they did not distinguish among different positions in the results. Nonetheless, interviewees various perceptions are represented thoroughly in this documented.

The interview questions were general in order to allow for new information and perspectives to emerge from the collected data. The interviewee often gave various answers to a question depending on whether they were referring to agency leaders, professional staff or clerical staff. Project staff attempted to represent the full variety of responses in this report, and to some extent perceptions have been melded.

While project staff collected qualitative data, a few of the questions asked were quantitative in nature and generally represent LHJ leaders' concerns. Regarding recruiting and retention, there was a question with a scale: **'On a scale of 1 to 5, how easy or difficult is it to recruit qualified staff?'** (1 is easy and 5 is very difficult). The average number for the twenty LHJs was **3.4**. Separating the LHJs, the average was 3.7 among small LHJs, 3.3 for mid-large LHJs, and 3.2 for very large LHJs. The range of responses was tightest for the very large LHJs and widest for the small LHJs (2-4.5). Note that the number of LHJs in each category is small.

The second scale question was, **'On a scale of 1 to 5, how easy or difficult is it to retain qualified staff?'** Retention on average seems to feel easier than recruiting for LHJs; the average for our subjects was 2.5. Among small LHJs the average was 2.3, among mid-large LHJs it was 2.8, and among very large LHJs, it was 2.4. Only one LHJ, a medium size one, gave a number higher than 3.5.

Also, each interviewee was asked approximately how long, on average, positions remained open before they are able to hire someone new. Overall the average was between 7 and 8 weeks. The difference among the various sizes of LHJs on average was not great. Noteworthy though, is that for small LHJs the range of time it took them to fill vacancies was from 3 to 14 weeks, while for very large LHJs the range was much smaller, 6 to 8 weeks.

II. RECRUITMENT

1. MAJOR THEMES

Strong recruiting practices

LHJs reported a variety of "strengths" that help them effectively recruit qualified employees. Some of the more common types of strengths LHJs described include:

- Being prepared in advance to begin the recruitment process, with a set procedure, managers trained for recruitment, and a team approach.
- Actively promoting the benefits of their workplace or of living and working in their location.

- Offering good pay or benefits.
- Recruiting candidates locally.

Core recruiting challenges

Some of the major themes that a number of LHJs mentioned as problems, weaknesses, or challenges to recruiting good employees include the following:

- Having an unstructured process without a useful recruitment policy.
- Having staff that are untrained or unprepared for the recruiting process.
- Having difficulty finding candidates who have proper qualifications, bring bilingualism/diversity, or will integrate into the community.
- Being restricted because of resources. Some of the main recruiting problems result from insufficient funding. Funding restrictions affect job advertisements, salaries, and the immediacy with which they must refill positions. LHJs also find recruiting candidates difficult because they do not have the time or personnel to do the task well.

The following sections will explore the above themes by discussing the major topic areas that LHJs brought up in the course of the interviews.

2. IMPORTANT TOPICS

Recruiting process

Recruiting new employees is both an important opportunity and a challenge for LHJs. Working with tight budgets and limited grants, LHJs tend to consider recruiting a strain because it absorbs resources, in particular money, time, and people. Some also see it as an opportunity, because recruiting forces them to evaluate their personnel needs, essential functions, position descriptions, and future projections.

While the recruiting procedure varied a great deal across the twenty LHJs interviewed and by the type of position for which they were recruiting (whether clerical, management, professional), the standard recruiting and hiring process for a vacant position was as follows:

- The hiring manager contacts the human resources division/person (internal or county).
- The hiring manager and/or administrator[†] review the position description to see if it is still relevant and necessary.
- The hiring manager updates the job description.
- The administrator gets permission to rehire (from the county, if a department).
- Human resources (or whoever is taking on the role) posts the vacancy advertisement internally.
- Human resources (or whoever is taking on the role) distributes the advertisement outside the LHJ.
- Human resources (or whoever is taking on the role) screen applications.
- The hiring manager decides who to interview and prepares interview questions (often with help from human resources).
- The hiring manager and others conduct interviews by panel.

[†] The “hiring manager” is usually a division or section supervisor or manager who oversees the position that is vacant. The administrator is the administrative head of the LHJ. An LHJ director may replace the administrator’s role in the above process.

- Candidates are selected
- Human resources (or whoever is taking on the role) conducts reference checks.
- The hiring manager chooses who to hire and the administrator approves the choice.

While a few LHJs projected a great deal of confidence regarding recruiting qualified employees, most seemed to find it difficult and stressful. A few mentioned having “good luck,” saying that they had mostly been able to find people when they needed, but they did not seem to think it was because of the quality and dependability of their recruiting approach.

Interviewees said that **agency leaders play a key role in recruiting new employees**. Agency leaders set standards, determine the policy and procedure, conduct recruiting in the absence of HR, interact with county government, and make decisions. The hiring managers also play an important role. They tend to have autonomy in terms of details of the hiring process, especially in the absence of a comprehensive recruiting policy. It is often up to them, for example, to take the time to re-examine the position description, decide how to rank applicants, and choose the interview questions and panel. Their roles in recruiting can make or break the process. “Program [managers] are actually looking at what the essential functions and competencies are that they need... those that do that reap the rewards of it. Some of our managers do a good job of it.”

Many interviewees stated or alluded to the idea that **a recruiting process is as good as the individuals conducting it**. If an LHJ has HR staff who are knowledgeable about the field of public health, hiring managers who have been trained in recruiting, and an administrator/ director who institutes recruiting plans and policies, the LHJ will be more successful in recruiting. Multiple times interviewees mentioned the importance of the hiring manager’s recruitment skills. Managers should know how to assess essential functions, write a position description, and plan an interview process. One LHJ was explicit that when the staff who participated in the recruiting process, in particular interviews, were well prepared, it improved the process. It seems to be in LHJs’ best interest to make sure their managers are trained in recruitment skills and prepare ahead of time for recruitment activities.

A number of LHJs recognized the importance of having a **strong team approach to recruiting**. A few of them referred to their team recruiting approaches as one of their greatest recruiting strengths. Teams could include hiring managers, other managers, administrators, professional staff, and clerical staff. They told us, essentially, that a team approach that includes open discussions among employees and shared responsibility for decisions was important for a positive recruiting process and led to better selections. One interviewee in particular expressed pride in his/her organization’s particularly collegial recruiting process. They made recruiting decisions by consensus, and consider that an important aspect of a good process.

Nearly all of the LHJs begin the recruiting process by reviewing the position they are about to fill. Some will thoroughly review the history of the position, the need for the position, the budget, and the details of the position description. The idea is to be able to defend, define, and explain the position well. A few mentioned that this sort of review is important because it helps make sure the hiring manager really knows who and what s/he is looking for. It is also important so that they can keep their job announcements updated and relevant.

“Scoring” was a recurring recruiting process topic of discussion in the interviews. Among LHJs, there is no consistency regarding whether or not they quantitatively score applications,

interviews, or other aspects of the recruiting process. Many do not score applications. Instead they check off or compare qualifications from a list. In many cases, the decision to score applications is left to the hiring manager's discretion, and individual LHJs did not have a consistent internal process. Scoring interviews (usually conducted by a panel) is more common. One LHJ interviewee also mentioned scoring candidates on how well they interact with employees when they visit for the interview. In general, ones who discussed scoring considered it a good practice because it lends consistency, objectivity, and comparability to the recruiting process. On the other hand, scoring systems are often imperfect, as one interviewee clarified. Applicants who would be well suited for the position may not end up at the top of a list developed from numerical scores if, for example, they have less experience. The issue of scoring is a nice representation of how recruiting processes vary within and among LHJs.

For **interviewing**, the following list of good practices emerged. Interviews are most successful when they are conducted by a prepared, trained panel that uses consistent score sheets so that they may easily compare candidates. It is helpful if the interview panel members are enthusiastic about their jobs and the recruiting process. Interviews that use situational questions and include activities to simulate actual work are very useful.

A few of the individuals interviewed explained that **actively marketing** their LHJ as a good place to work was an important aspect of their recruiting process. They want candidates to be aware of the advantages of living in their community and working in their agency. In most cases, the interviewees who discussed this were from LHJs who found recruiting new employees difficult and found it necessary to try to convince potential candidates that they should want to work with their LHJ in that location. This topic will come up again later with information comparing rural and non-rural settings.

Cost of Recruitment

Interviewees tended to talk about recruitment in terms of cost. **Advertising job openings, lost staff productivity, and other aspects of the recruiting process can be expensive.** Not only does recruiting consume financial resources, it also consumes human resources and time. From interviewees perspective, a good recruiting process is one that does not demand excess resources. One LHJ interviewee described the cost-efficiency of their process as their greatest recruitment strength. Much more common, however, are LHJs who are concerned because they have to rush their recruiting process and simplify it in order to get applicants quickly and cheaply and hire a replacement hastily. The costly nature of recruiting means that LHJs either sacrificed efficiency and consumed time and resources to properly fill positions, or they hired quickly out of necessity, worrying that they could have found a better person if they did not feel such time pressure.

The costly (in terms of money, people, and time) nature of recruiting has many explanations and implications. The LHJs interviewed do not have enough funding for human resources and recruiting. LHJs with scarce employee recruiting budgets 1) may have insufficient HR staff 2) may not advertise in the broadest reaching or more influential venues such as in the Sunday paper or with APHA; and 3) may not be able to train their staff in skills necessary for effective recruiting. Regarding cost, it is also problematic that some LHJs are not using time, people, and money efficiently, not taking advantage of less expensive options (generally because of lack of

knowledge or lack of time), and not attracting very many candidates. Subsequent sections of report explore these issues further.

Recruitment Policy

The interviewees' general position on recruitment policy was fairly straightforward. **Having a defined, explicit policy helps with consistency, setting expectations and standards, and institutional memory.** Not only is it useful to have recorded recruiting policy, it is also useful to keep records on past recruiting processes, so they can learn from methods that have worked well in the past.

Despite the common recognition that a recruiting policy is useful, many LHJs do not have recruiting policy manuals. Not having a defined recruiting policy did not seem problematic to many; they were still able to have a recruiting process that is consistent and adaptable as needed. It becomes problematic when placed in the context of other issues such as turnover and changing leadership. Without recruiting records and policy, a great deal of institutional memory is lost when managers and executive leaders leave their positions. Also, without recruiting records LHJs are less likely to learn from past successes and failures.

Methods by which LHJs collect recruitment records:

- Entrance interviews for recent hirees
- Exit interviews
- Recruitment process reports from managers

Another policy related area that interviewees discussed was job classifications. Some LHJs find [locally determined] job classifications and the requirements for them too rigid. Because the requirements are rigid, they are not able to hire people who they feel would be able to fill the position adequately. A later section about environmental health professionals covers this issue a bit further.

HR and County Government

Slightly more than half the LHJs interviewed had internal human resources (HR) departments or staff. A couple of those LHJs work with the county government HR in addition to their own. Many of the rest of the LHJs rely primarily on the county government HR for their recruitment processes. A few LHJs explained that they have "no HR" assistance because their county HR was ineffective. Among all LHJs interviewed, the health districts all had internal human resource departments. The health departments could be divided into three groups, county HR, internal HR, or no formal HR.

Whether or not a LHJ has access to HR staff who are both trained in recruiting practices and knowledgeable about the field of public health appears to be important because an LHJ's HR arrangement and capacity affects recruitment processes and the organization. An LHJ with poor HR support for recruitment must shift many man-hours from services and operations to the process of recruiting. On the other hand, LHJs with trained HR personnel have greater capacity to do useful activities like placing job advertisements in a wide variety of venues, conducting elaborate situational interviews, and recording recruiting practices.

Having access to HR staff does not necessarily make the process easy. LHJs with internal HR still have recruiting problems, and may not have clear recruiting policy. A couple interviewees thought that using HR made the process more cumbersome and that more of the process should be left to the hiring manager. One also complained about having an overly-controlled, inflexible system. Nonetheless, interviewees whose LHJs had little or no access to HR emphasized dissatisfaction with their recruitment process much more than did those LHJs had HR staff.

Many LHJs (in particular those who are health departments) either depend upon local county government for HR assistance or must involve county government in some aspects of the recruitment process. Involvement with county government and county HR presents both benefits and challenges. One of the main benefits if being associated with county government that a number of LHJs mentioned is that, in some cases, the county is considered an attractive employer and/or offers desirable pay or benefits. Another benefit mentioned by one interviewee is that by working with the county HR, they do not have to maintain internal HR staff.

Some LHJs are limited because they depend on county HR even though it may not be very effective. The challenges of working with county HR are significant to many LHJs. Challenges include:

- Their county HR department is understaffed and or underfunded.
- HR, when recruiting, does not target the appropriate public health professional fields.
- County HR may not know about specific websites or listserves where many public health candidates seek jobs.
- The county job classifications or requirements are too rigid.
- Potential applicants must go to the county website to apply using the standard county application.
- The county website is not useful or is difficult to use for recruitment purposes.
- County HR uses group advertisements, so public health positions are clumped with rest of the county's job openings.

Working with the county government in recruitment poses additional challenges for LHJs. In some cases, an open position must be approved a numerous levels in county government before an LHJ can rehire. Many must get permission from their county Commissioners to before they fill openings. One interviewee explained that between the county government, specifically the Commissioners, and the unions, they do not have very much control over the hiring process. Other LHJs explained that they receive very little assistance from the county government and would like more.

Where LHJs advertise job openings

LHJs in Washington advertise their job vacancies in a broad variety of venues. Finding effective vacancy-advertising venues and methods is problematic for many LHJs. One stated, **“One of our weaknesses has been getting an adequate way to find qualified individuals who want to get into public health.”**

Many LHJs, especially those who are unionized, begin their candidate search by advertising internally. It provides both a low-cost way to find candidates for a vacancy and offer employees

an opportunity for advancement within the organization in settings in which promotions may not be an option. One interviewee explained that internal searches for candidates also may be used to encourage current employees to advertise vacancies by word-of-mouth, a method that has been successful for finding local candidates.

When LHJs advertise job vacancies in the local community, as nearly all of them do, they use newspaper advertisements most, but also take advantage of local employment offices or websites, as well as local colleges and universities. LHJs who search locally do so not only because it is likely to be less expensive recruitment, but also because they prefer to hire employees from the surrounding community. We will explore this topic further in the Local Population section.

Many LHJs search for candidates regionally, statewide, or even nationally. The Internet as a recruiting tool has made nationwide searches an option for even the smallest health jurisdictions. Regional searches are useful because they reach people who are looking for a career change without traveling very far, people within public health from nearby who are looking for opportunities for promotion, and people who used to live in the community who may be interested in returning. Regional recruitment may also allow rural LHJs to seek candidates in the nearest urban settings. Broad scale candidate searches, which may or may not be expensive, are important to LHJs for recruiting individuals with specialized skills, desirable leadership and management experience, and diverse backgrounds.

Larger LHJs with more HR capacity do not all advertise more broadly than do smaller LHJs. In some cases, smaller LHJs use a variety of media and distribute their advertisement over a far distance. Also, in some cases the large LHJs have streamlined recruiting and advertise openings in only a few venues. Rather than size of the LHJ, **desirability and recognize-ability as an employer seems to be more associated with how broadly an LHJ searches for candidates.**

Cost also determines where and how broadly LHJs advertise vacancies. A few interviewees said that they only advertise vacancies using methods that are free or very cheap; whether those methods reach candidates near or far was a secondary consideration. They use local and national employment offices, websites and listserves. They speak with local colleges. They take advantage of word-of-mouth advertising. The **low-budget candidate searches** they described may be time consuming, but are possible.

While a number of LHJ interviewees described recruitment practices that might be perceived as **targeted marketing**, only one mentioned intentionally doing so. S/he said that if they at the LHJ know of a specific group or population sector from which they wish to attract candidates, they will target that group when they market the position for a few days before they look more broadly. The approach had saved them time and money in the past. Targeted marketing for hard-to-fill vacancies such as those for nursing and environmental health professionals appears to be an underutilized approach

“If the program has an idea of candidates in the area that they want to do some targeting marketing with, we will post the position for them for five or fewer days.”

LHJs use newspapers to advertise job openings more than any other method. Only one midsized LHJ, of those interviewed, stated specifically that they do not use newspapers (except for clerical positions). All other LHJs interviewed use at

least one local newspaper up to five. In most cases they use broad reaching newspapers such as the Seattle Times, Seattle Post Intelligencer, Tacoma News Tribune, Spokane Spokesman Review, Vancouver WA Columbian, and Portland Oregonian.

The Internet is an important tool for recruiting for most LHJs. Most LHJs interviewed use the Internet for at least some aspects of employee recruitment. In some cases they have their own websites (about half of those interviewed) on which they might post job openings. Interestingly, most of the LHJs that stated they have their own website also have internal human resources departments. Many LHJs also post openings on their county government website or another county employment website. Some of them stated that they consider it a weakness that they do not use the Internet more or more strategically.

A number of LHJs post job openings on Worksource Washington, the state's official online employment site. Additionally, some LHJs advertise on national public-health-specific websites such as American Public Health Association (APHA), Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO), National Association of County and City health Officials (NACCHO), or Emory's Public Health Employment Connection (see Appendix 2 with descriptions of public-health specific sites). Other Internet sites the interviewees mentioned include:

- SouthSoundJobs.com (the Tacoma News Tribune's career builder site)
- NWjobs (Seattle Times online employment listing)
- Washington State Association of Counties
- University and college employment sites, specifically University of Washington School of Public Health and Washington State University.
- Washington Environmental Health Directors
- America's Job Bank
- Craigslist.com

A number of specialty sites were mentioned:

- Indeed.com for information/technology positions
- Association of Washington Cities for administration positions
- Washington State Environmental Health Association for environmental health positions
- Nursing sites (no specific ones were mentioned; <http://www.nursingjobs.org/public-health/> may be an example)

Using local websites (either their own or the county's) to advertise job openings is useful for LHJs because it may draw attention to their websites and can help reach a local population. On the other hand, it may hinder an LHJs recruitment if they depend on local websites, because non-local job seekers are less likely to find those vacancies in an Internet job search, unless they know specifically where to look. LHJs who want to attract job seekers to their websites would benefit from promoting their websites and broadly advertising the fact that they post job openings there.

Listserves are also online resources that LHJs use to recruit employees. A listserv is a large email list of people who submit their email because of a common interest. List members can usually post information for other members. Common listserves on which LHJs might advertise job openings include ones for:

- Nursing (Washington State Nurses Association, Public Health Nursing Directors)

- Environmental health (National Environmental Health Association, Washington State Environmental Health Association, Washington State Environmental Health Directors)
- Washington State Association of Local Public Health Officials
- Washington Association of Counties
- National Association of County and City Health Officials
- Association of State and Territorial Health Officials

A few LHJs, both large and small, said that not using the Internet enough was one of their recruitment weaknesses. Clearly, LHJs have begun to recognize the Internet as a powerful recruiting tool. Larger LHJs were more vocal about needing to improve their Internet use for recruitment. At this point, many LHJs have not made enough of a transition from their traditional recruitment methods to the Internet-based methods that they recognize as the current job-search trend. When the interviewer informally asked masters of public health students where they plan to begin their job searches, a majority of them named the Internet as their first resource. None of them mentioned searching for jobs in the newspapers. **When LHJs focus their recruiting efforts in newspapers, they are not reaching a large pool of potential candidates who conduct their job searches on the Internet.**

Schools

Colleges and universities are a useful resource for LHJs. While more than once, interviewees mentioned that they do not think job fairs at schools are an efficient use of money, a number of them said that their relationships with local colleges or universities had helped them recruit new employees. Those that mentioned it considered it a strength of their recruiting process. To engage college students, whether nursing, environmental health, general public health or any other major, some LHJs have:

- set up practicum or internship opportunities to give students experience and exposure.
- hosted outings and invited schools to bring students to visit the LHJ to learn what it does and what career opportunities are available.
- advertised their job openings on university employment opportunities pages.
- sent recruiters to talk to students in relevant majors about career opportunities in public health.

Alternative recruiting methods

Counties mentioned other methods for recruiting candidates that tend to attract people locally or regionally. Aside from advertising job opening in newspapers, on the Internet, or at colleges, interviewees mentioned advertising with their county's employment office. A couple also stated that they send job announcements to the local tribal authority. Some LHJs post their job vacancies in hospitals. They have attracted nurses from hospitals in the past.

The most commonly mentioned alternative recruiting method is informal recruiting. A number of LHJs find word-of-mouth advertising a useful recruiting method. LHJs of all sizes mentioned it. They like informal methods because sometimes their current employees will know people with relevant skills or experiences who they may not easily reach with their job advertisements. The current employees will likely have a good sense of the type of person and type of skills that

will best suit the job. They are also likely to have a circle of associates outside the LHJ with interests related to their own. **Word-of-mouth recruiting has helped various LHJs find qualified and well-matched candidates.**

Unions

Unions are an important entity for influencing employee recruiting and retention policy and procedures in LHJs in Washington. Importantly, not all LHJs are unionized. Of the non-unionized LHJs interviewed, all are small. Many LHJs are only partially unionized, in particular because some of their staff have grant-funded or contract positions.

Unions have various levels of influence over recruitment in LHJs in Washington. In some of those cases, interviewees who were agency leaders and not union members, felt union agreements had erected barriers to an effective or efficient recruiting process. However, in some counties, the bargaining units had little influence over the LHJ's recruiting process. Because influences varied, it is inappropriate to make general statements about the effect unions have on recruiting new employees in LHJs.

Most union contracts in the LHJs interviewed contained stipulations that LHJs must 1) notify the bargaining unit that they plan to hire, 2) advertise job openings in-house first before opening them to the public, and 3) shape jobs according to union agreement. Interviewees explained that commonly unions have influenced the number of hours per week the employees can work in LHJs. Most of the union-related aspects of recruiting that interviewees mentioned affect employee retention as well and will be discussed in the second part of this report.

The Role of Salaries, Benefits, Promotion, and Workplace

Salaries, benefits, and opportunities for promotion are aspects of jobs that affect employee recruitment in LHJs. Interviewees described them as major factors. Yet, salaries, benefits, and opportunities for promotion are neither the only factors nor always the most important factors that hinder or help employee recruitment. LHJs stated that other factors already mentioned such as the recruitment method, organizational readiness, and internal recruitment practices are also very important (in some cases, more important) for effective employee recruitment.

Of course, **salaries, benefits, and opportunities for promotion affect both employee recruiting and retention.** Quite a few LHJs considered either the salaries or benefits they offer major detriments to their employee recruitment. One interviewee gave the example that some professional employees could not afford to buy homes in the same city as their LHJ offices because of the discrepancy between their salary and the cost of living in their community. Other interviewees explained that they could not find candidates with the level of qualifications that they require, especially for nursing and environmental health, for the pay scale they (or their county) had to offer. As one LHJ stated, it is difficult to find qualified people because of "a combination of trying to find the right experience, [for the] pay and [at this] location"

Conversely, a few LHJs said the good benefits or salary they offer helped them recruit candidates. The recruitment-enhancing benefits they specifically mentioned were good hours

and health insurance coverage. With regard to salary, one interviewee said “these are good jobs for a rural area. The pay is good.” Paying well “for our area” seemed to be the most relevant standard of comparison to which interviewees referred, rather than a statewide comparison. Pay was a positive contributing factor for local candidate recruitment more than for outside-the-area candidate recruitment.

Interviewees also talked about the advantages of their workplace and workforce. A positive workplace or workforce was a common theme when we were discussing employee retention, but it was relevant to recruitment as well. Interviewees explained that having a strong workforce with a positive team environment and valued workers helped them recruit new candidates, because the **candidate had heard the health department was a good place to work**. Some LHJs said that they work to obtain or maintain a reputation as a good place to work in the county because it helps them recruit better people.

Specific Positions in LHJs

While interviewees mentioned having trouble recruiting a variety of positions from mental health to chemical dependency to epidemiologists, the two positions most mentioned were public health nurses and environmental health specialists. Although only a few LHJs mentioned concern over recruiting agency leaders, those that did were particularly anxious. Recruiting for management and leadership positions will be one of the greatest recruiting concerns in the coming months and years for a number of LHJs.

Conversely, while some LHJs have high turnover among clerical and administrative staff, interviewees tended to mention those positions as the easiest to recruit. They tend to find such staff locally without a very extensive search. The exception to this was when they require the clerical staff to be bilingual. Recruiting qualified bilingual clerical staff poses a challenge to LHJs.

Public Health Nursing

LHJs have difficulty recruiting public health nurses. To exacerbate the problem, in many LHJs, nursing is the position which has had the most turn-over over the last number of years. This means they have had to recruit nurses more often than other positions. The difficulty with recruiting nurses is multifaceted. The following points are common and paint a picture of the issue.[‡]

- Because of the shortage of nurses, LHJs often find few or no nursing candidates when they advertise public health nursing job openings.
- The main reason LHJs feel recruitment is difficult is that they can not compete with hospitals and other nurse employers in terms of pay and benefits.
- It is particularly difficult to find nurse candidates with a four-year BSN.
- It is particularly difficult to find nurse candidates with public health training or experience.

LHJs’ difficulty with hiring nurses has different outcomes in different settings. Many LHJs settle for nurses who do not have the qualifications for which they are looking. When they do

[‡] See the Washington State Department of Health 2004 report, “Everybody Counts,” for more information on this topic.

this, they either have to shift extra duties to their other nurses or they have to train their new nurses in the skills they will need. While training nurses in public health skills is one solution, one interviewee in particular stated that it does not work well. It is difficult to train a clinician to think in a public health context. Another way one of the LHJs has adjusted to the shortage of qualified nurse candidates when they have had job openings is to rewrite the position and recruit qualified non-nurses to perform the non-clinical aspects of the work. Perhaps the least desirable result of the nursing shortage is that LHJs sometimes are unable to recruit nurses and are forced to add to their current nurse employees' workload.

Not all LHJs have difficulty recruiting public health nurses. A few said specifically that they do not have trouble finding nurses. The most common reason LHJs gave for their success in attracting nursing candidates was that they offered a more desirable work setting and schedule than competing employers such as hospitals. One LHJ explained that in their health department the nurses work predictable hours and have the opportunity for flex hours. For some nurses, especially those with families, this gives working for an LHJ an advantage over working for a hospital.

Two other responses are relevant to why some LHJs have not had difficulty recruiting nurses. A couple LHJs mentioned that there was no nearby hospital, so they were the primary employers of nurses in the area. They did not have trouble finding or retaining their nurses because there are not other options. Lastly, some LHJs have not had to hire nurses for a number of years because their turnover is very low. Their workforce has been stable, so they have not experienced recruitment difficulty.

Environmental public health professionals

Nearly as many interviewees who talked about public health nurses as the position their LHJ had the most difficulty recruiting gave environmental health specialists that distinction. In general, it is difficult for LHJs to find qualified individuals to fill environmental public health job vacancies. LHJs often find themselves **competing against private sector employers or large government contracts for candidates** with appropriate qualifications.

Aside from competing employers, LHJs listed **pay as a primary reason it is difficult to recruit qualified environmental health professionals**. Many qualified individuals are not interested in jobs with LHJs because the salaries are low a) considering their level of education, and b) compared to what they might find elsewhere. Since the salaries are unattractive, the few candidates they do find come to the work for reasons other than pay. One interviewee, when talking about environmental health professionals stated, "The pay is low. [Our] EH guys love what they do, but they don't do it for the pay. They do it because they get to be outside and working with people." If LHJs want to improve the number and quality of candidates that apply for local environmental health jobs and not depend on finding the few who do it regardless of the pay, increasing their salaries would likely help.

Not only are pay and competing employers problematic, but LHJs also consider job requirements a hindrance to recruiting candidates. The LHJ or county requirements[§] for education or number of years of previous experience that are necessary to hire people in classifications such as a Level

[§] Qualification requirements for hiring environmental health professionals are determined locally, not by the state. Often LHJs will base their requirements on federal recommendations.

1 Environmental Health Specialist provide a recruitment challenge to LHJs. From what interviewees said, it seems that the more rigid or numerous the position requirements are, the more difficulty they having with recruiting.

Perhaps even more than with nursing, interviewees explained that when they have job openings in their environmental health division and can not find qualified candidates, they may hire under-qualified candidates and train them for the job. They explained that they look for people with strong science education and build on that. The next section explains this topic further.

Hiring then Training

An unfortunate aspect of having a small pool of applicants from which to select is that LHJs are often faced with candidates who do not have enough skills or experience. As mentioned above, when LHJs in Washington can not find a qualified individual to fill a job opening, they often hire a candidate with some critical qualifications and train them to be able to complete all of their job functions. In particular, LHJs often hire people because of their educational background and then train them in skills. Examples of this include training nurses in public health skills and training people with science degrees to be environmental health professionals.

One LHJ explained that they have had success hiring and training individuals from the local community. Not only does it resolve their problem of not being able to find qualified candidates, but the individuals they hire already know the surrounding community. Another interviewee explained that the LHJ will hire local people and train them but only for clerical positions; they had not been able to do that for the professional positions.

One interviewee from a smaller LHJ said that they would like to recruit local people and train them for positions, but they did not have enough resources to have a thorough training program. The interviewee thought it would help if the state would **develop a six month intensive program** for people with a B.S. so that they can send local, partially-qualified people to get the basic training they need to be, for example, environmental health professionals.

“The lack of financial resources and lack of training programs that are available [hinder our ability to train local people]... I think something more at the state level would be needed. Maybe a six month training program for a specific section of environmental health so that people could come out and hit the ground running.”

A number of LHJs explained that hiring under-qualified candidates and training them for the job is not in the LHJ’s best interest. Not only is it costly in terms of money and manpower, but also the newly-trained employee will often leave for a better paying job. One LHJ described it as **a cycle of training employees, giving them experience, and then replacing them**. While most of the interviewees who described this phenomenon consider it problematic, one individual explained that s/he was nonetheless glad to be improving the state’s pool of public health professionals, even if his/her own LHJs had to deal with higher turnover.

Rare skills or attributes

We asked interviewees what attributes they had the most trouble finding among candidates they recruited. Their responses include:

- Language skills
- Management experience
- Leadership skills or experience
- Training specific to public health such as epidemiology or community health promotion
- Specific technical skills

A couple interviewees referred to their LHJs having difficulty with recruiting qualified bilingual candidates for public health positions. Another interviewee explained that they had been seeking to build a more diverse staff to better reflect their community, but recruiting diverse candidates poses a challenge for a variety of reasons (they did not explain). Along that theme, one interviewee considered it a major weakness of his/her LHJ's recruitment process that they made few deliberate efforts to recruit in minority communities.

Local Population

As mentioned before, **many of the individuals interviewed said that they prefer to recruit candidates from the local population.** Local searches for candidates are relatively less expensive and time consuming. Employees they hire from the local population have the advantage of already knowing the area and the community. The hiring managers are more likely to know the local candidates already, so they will have a better sense of whether the individual will fit into the workplace. Also, employees they hire from the local population have ties to the location, so they are more likely to stay longer. Interviewees also explained that employees they hire from outside the area are more likely to leave within a few years than those who are from the local area.

Conversely, a few interviewees said that their LHJs did not spend more than a minimum effort recruiting in the local population, because in the past they had not found qualified candidates locally. LHJs who did not conduct local candidate searches found such recruitment to contribute too much to their inefficiency. The local candidates they did find were "local people just looking for a job." The exception to this tended to be for non-professional positions.

Rural LHJs

The more rural LHJs have trouble with both local and external recruitment. Some interviewees from rural LHJs said they rarely found qualified candidates in the surrounding population. They explained that few local people had the kind of education that professional public health positions require. Also, they said that few people meet job requirements for skills or experience. Not only do they not find candidates locally, they also have trouble finding candidates from more urban areas who will move to a rural setting. One interviewee explained, "Not everybody wants to be at the end of the two lane road in Eastern Washington."

Overall, the challenge interviewees described that most rural small to midsized LHJs face is: **They would like to hire people from the local population, but they rarely find people from the local population who are qualified for the positions. This leads them to seek candidates**

from outside the local population, but those candidates are difficult to recruit, do not know the community, and are less likely to stay.

As the below table presents, working for a rural LHJ has many benefits of which LHJs may take advantage when they recruit. If LHJs put forth the effort to actively sell themselves and the benefits of working for public health in a smaller LHJ, they may find a larger pool of applicants from outside the local area who are interested in the lifestyle they would find there. As one interviewee said, “We probably need to advertise [public health jobs] in ‘Field and Stream.’” Whether small or large, **many LHJs might improve their recruiting by promoting the benefits of living in their local community and working in the important, interesting jobs that public health offers.** LHJs have had various level of success with using self promotion to improve recruitment.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Being Rural	
<u>Rural LHJs: advantages of the location</u>	<u>Rural LHJs: disadvantages of the location</u>
If there is a city nearby, they may attract applicants interesting in changing to a rural lifestyle.	If there is a city nearby, better-paying urban jobs attract educated and qualified community members
Outdoor recreation and natural beauty	Far from the shopping and entertainment options one would find in an urban setting
Caring, tight-knit community	Possibly weak schools, few jobs for spouses
Stress-free driving.	Long drives, airports are far.
The cost of living is lower than in urban areas.	Rural LHJs’ payscales are often not high enough considering the cost of living and the amount of education the require of their employees.
May not have a nearby hospital to compete for nurses	May have poor health care infrastructure, which deters potential employees
	Ends up being a training ground for inexperienced employees who later leave for better paying jobs
	People who move from more urban settings often do not stay long.

3. IDEAL RECRUITING

We asked interviewees to describe their ideal recruiting process.

- ⇒ The most common type of response referred to improving LHJs’ **access to a qualified pool of applicants.** For example:

- Ideally for a number of LHJs, a pool of experienced, skilled people would be available and be soliciting LHJs for work. Some interviewees said they would like if there were a database of potential applicants. One recommended that there could be a state personnel board where screened applicants names and scores were kept, so if LHJs have a position open they could request a list of top applicants to interview.
 - A couple interviewees thought universities should have programs to get undergraduate students into public health, with internships required so they graduate with experience.
 - Many interviewees thought their ideal recruitment would incorporate new and more efficient methods to reach candidates such as active recruiting from universities, targeted marketing to specific groups, and LHJs' websites.
 - Most LHJs would like if there was a statewide database where they could freely post job openings and that they could market to the public. "It would be nice to go to one place and say, 'here's the job' and it gets posted out in a variety of locations [in the state]."
- ⇒ Many LHJs said that **improving their human resources capacity** would make recruiting ideal. Many who do not already have them would like internal, full-time human resources personnel who could conduct an entire formalized process. They would also like a greater recruiting budget and a faster process. One LHJ, rather than preferring to have an internal human resource department for recruiting, would like to participate more in the recruiting process the county conducts. Another LHJ would like to be able to conduct entrance interviews, so they could learn ways to improve the recruiting process from new employees, and manager interviews, so they can learn more about past recruiting processes from managers. They also mentioned wishing they had better tools to measure and forecast their future personnel needs.

⇒ Another aspect of recruiting that would make LHJs recruiting process more ideal was mentioned once in response to this question: a better pay scale.

A "Dream." One interviewee described his/her "dream" arrangement, which may or may not be a dream for other LHJs. In the dream, local health agencies would not be part of county government. Instead, all LHJs would be health districts that were regional institutions with local services and service areas. Then LHJs within a health service area would be able to share specialists among counties and distribute resources.

4. RECRUITING REFLECTIONS

Pool of Candidates

Having a good pool of candidates improves the selection aspect of the recruiting process. "Our process is good when we get an adequate sample," one interviewee shared. An adequate pool of

candidates enables LHJs to be selective. It help them to choose qualified candidates who are more likely to fit their workplace and integrate well into the community. When LHJs have a sufficient pool of candidates applying for jobs, they are more able to recruit a strong workforce.

From what interviewees said, we can gather that part of the reason they do not find a good pool of candidates when they have job vacancies is that they have inappropriate or insufficient job advertising methods. Appropriate job advertising methods, as described by the interviewees, would include:

- Advertising using approaches that are most likely to find the type of candidate they need.
- Using certain methods, such as specific websites, to target populations.
- Having recruitment plans and procedures in place.
- Work together with other LHJs to pay for vacancy advertisements.
- Using local resources: colleges and universities, tribal authority, word-of-mouth and local relationships.
- Selling the strengths of the work, the workplace, and the community.

Comparing Large and Small

While we have to be careful about making generalizations, especially about small-sized LHJs, LHJ size did seem to make a difference in terms of employee recruitment. The interviewer found in this assessment that for many areas of recruitment there was more variation among small LHJs than there was among large or very large LHJs. For example, the amount of perceived difficulty, the amount of time to replace an employee, and recruitment methods varied tremendously among small LHJs.

All of the large or very large LHJs interviewed had internal HR and unions, and all but one had their own websites. They were notably split over whether their primary method of advertising vacancies is in newspapers or online. Large LHJs did not advertise vacancies in more or more varied venues than do smaller LHJs. Large LHJs did have difficulty with aspects of recruiting, as smaller LHJs did, especially for some specific positions, such as nursing.

Smaller LHJs are less likely than larger LHJs to have HR assistance or to have managers trained in recruitment practices. For smaller LHJs, recruitment tends to absorb more time from day-to-day operations. Rural location, few or unqualified applicants, and low salaries are much more common recruitment concerns for smaller LHJs than for larger LHJs. **Interviewees from smaller LHJs tended to convey more concern, generally, over filling vacancies and over their level of preparation for doing so.**

While the nature of challenges and concerns varies a bit according to LHJ size, there were few obvious size trends with regards to recruitment strengths. What trends we did see were related to the fact that large and very large LHJs had internal, trained HR personnel. As a result of having HR personnel, they were more likely than smaller LHJs to have recruitment policy and record-keeping.

Large and small LHJs alike seem to share concerns over recruiting nurses, loosing employees to better paying employers, working with county government, and finding diverse or bilingual employees.

Lessons learned

What it means to “have difficulty recruiting candidates” varies across LHJs. Often an LHJ will have great difficulty recruiting for a specific position, such as a nurse or environmental health specialist, but not for others. Difficulty filling one vacancy may make them feel recruitment is generally problematic. On the other hand, some LHJs regularly have difficulty recruiting candidates whenever they have openings. We found that LHJs’ actual and perceived recruitment problems do not align predictably. This misalignment leads to an understanding that we should be conscious of **the importance of addressing recruitment issues on an individual LHJ level.** It is unlikely that all LHJs’ recruitment challenges can be resolved with sweeping methods. LHJs have variant needs.

LHJs of all sizes that serve more rural communities face challenges in recruiting people locally. They would prefer to hire people from the local community who already live there and know the area, but local people who apply are often unqualified for the open positions. When they recruit people from outside the community to fill the vacancies, those people often do not stay long. A solution to this issue would be to **develop professional training programs** that LHJs can conduct or send people to so that they may train local, educated adults in necessary skills. The idea is to enable more people to work in public health in their home community.

Nearly all LHJs advertise job vacancies in newspapers, many of them do so primarily. Job seekers are using newspapers less, and searching for job opportunities on the Internet more. LHJs in Washington need to shift their recruitment priorities so that they focus more on the Internet as their primary recruitment tool. **Using the Internet more will give LHJs access to more and a greater variety of candidates.** Perhaps the Workforce Development Committee could develop a guide for LHJs to help them efficiently use the Internet for recruitment. Along those lines, Appendix 2 has some useful information about Internet web sites that LHJs may use for posting vacancies.

Recruiting nurses and environmental health professionals is difficult for many LHJs in Washington. The problem is not ubiquitous, but it is widespread and we can not afford to ignore it. **A strength-based approach** in which LHJs sell to candidates the strengths of the diverse work, their workplace, and their communities appears to hold potential for addressing this problem. It would be useful if LHJs had a guide to assessing their strengths and promoting those strengths to improve recruitment results.

When LHJs **keep records of their past recruiting efforts and maintain an updated recruitment policy,** they have more ability to make informed decisions about their workforce and their recruitment. Practices such as exit interviews, entrance interviews, recruitment process reports, and internal recruitment trainings, will help HR and hiring managers learn from their own experiences and maintain institutional memory.

III. RETENTION

The approaches or practices interviewees described as effective for retaining good workers varied greatly from one LHJ to the next. Responses included everything from descriptions of thorough benefits packages and work-environment improvement efforts to explanations that there are no formal retention efforts. The following sections review the information interviewees shared regarding their retention efforts.

While workforce retention concerns agency leaders in LHJs in Washington, many people did not consider retention as difficult as recruitment. For example, one interviewee stated, “Our location works for us for retention but against us for recruiting.” Interviewees spoke of retention and employee turnover as an inconvenient, natural aspect of the organizations. In twenty interviews, fourteen stated that they have “low turnover.” A few stated that they do not find retention problematic. Many interviewees expressed much stronger concern for individual factors that contribute to retention, such as pay or promotion opportunities, than they did for the overall issue of retention.

The issue at hand: Turnover

As mentioned above, most LHJs consider themselves to have “low turnover.” This report explores the explanations interviewees offered, including discussions of retention strengths, in the following sections. Even though turnover is low for many, LHJs are challenged by the factors that contribute to turnover and employee dissatisfaction. **Because the factors that contribute to staff turnover may have broader institutional repercussions, turnover is significant even when it seems infrequent.** This report may be useful because it gives insight into strategies that LHJs use to retain good employees through examining the roots of employee turnover.

Even organizations with a low turnover experience periods of higher turnover, for example when contracts or grants end or when they have waves of retirements. At those times, they too must deal with the organizational stress employee turnover may cause. Furthermore, as later paragraphs explain, the increasing number of retiring public health workers in the state is a real concern. One interviewee explained that even though turnover had been low, s/he was anxious about the future and the possibility of losing people.

Many LHJs do not have good records of their employee turnover. Less than half of those interviewed regularly conduct exit interviews. Few LHJs have a tracking system. In some cases, county governments have an employee tracking system with exit interviews, but the LHJs do not have access to the information or have not taken advantage of it. Fortunately, in smaller organizations people often know a great deal about the staff and its history because of the nature of staff interactions and longevity. Many have informal records. Most LHJs, large and small, would benefit from analyzing turnover. The information they gain could help them deal with future recruitment and retention challenges

An important caveat regarding workforce retention that only one interviewee addressed is that retention may be undesirable in some cases. Sometimes it benefits organizations to have staff turnover. One individual explained that s/he does not consider it problematic when staff leaves because “the qualified ones tend to stay.” Turnover encourages changes, internal-analysis, and innovation. Most people spoke of retention in the context of talking about how to retain good employees, partially because of how the interview questions were worded. A few did mention that sometimes they retain employees when they would prefer not to. Generally, however, interviewees spoke of factors that contribute to retention as positive and the factors that weaken retention as negative.

1. MAJOR THEMES

Strong retention practices

LHJ interviewees reported a variety of workforce retention activities. The following commonly mentioned topics are among the retention-improving factors that we will explore in more detail.

- Workplace environment
- Pay and benefits
- Schedule flexibility
- Open two-way communication
- Training opportunities
- Type of work
- Community involvement

Core retention issues

Some of the major themes that a number of LHJs mentioned as problems, weaknesses, or challenges to retaining good employees include the following:

- Pay
- Lack of opportunities for promotion
- Having no organized retention effort
- Retirement
- People who take a job to gain experience then leave for a “better” job
- Intra-staff and staff-management relationships

The following sections will further explain the above themes by exploring the major topic areas regarding employee retention that LHJ interviewees brought up in the course of the interviews.

2. IMPORTANT RETENTION TOPICS

Training Employees

Most of the interviewees described their LHJs’ efforts to encourage, support, or provide employee training as an important factor that helps maintain a qualified workforce. Some interviewees found workforce training especially useful for retention when the employees had the opportunity have a say in or help develop the training they would get. Similarly, some LHJs

whose employees do not offer opportunities for further training and development considered it a major weakness of their retention efforts.

Employee training includes in-house trainings, online or computer-based resources, and courses or workshops to which the employees travel. Interviewees said employees receive training in areas such as new technology, data analysis, management, and cultural competence. Training helps staff meet the challenges and needs they see in their community, so they “stay relevant.” One interviewee was emphatic that keeping employees up-to-date with technology and advances in the field was important for retention.

“We are providing opportunities for employees to go to trainings, develop new skills, and stay on top of the changing dynamic of their area of specialization.”

Opportunities for development and training help employees build their professional skills, capacity, and confidence. In cases where LHJs have had to hire under-qualified employees to fill positions, training gives LHJs the opportunity to develop the quality of workforce they need, as described in the discussion on recruitment.

Not all interviewees spoke positively about workforce training efforts. Some thought perhaps developing or training their staff could help with retention, but were not certain that it actually had any affect. Others were concerned that when they gave their employees training, the employees would move on to better paying positions once they gained experience.

One interviewee, mentioned earlier in the Hiring and Training section, had a broader vision of the importance of training staff. S/he explained that they need to keep in mind that they are developing a workforce, not only for their own LHJ, but also for the field. They should work on **developing workers’ abilities for the field of public health**, without as much concern for whether or not they think an employee will later move on to another LHJ.

Pay and Benefits

The information interviewees shared about pay and benefits varied widely across LHJs, making it difficult to make general statements that represent their situation. Most LHJs consider pay and benefits major factors affecting workforce retention, whether they are positive or negative.

Around half of those interviewed thought salaries they offer helped them retain their employees. Also, around two thirds of the interviewees thought benefits they offer contributed to employee retention. Approximately a quarter thought pay and benefits were the **most important factors of all they used for retaining employees**. Conversely, a little more than a quarter of interviewees consider the salary they were able to offer as their greatest weakness or challenge in trying to retain employees.

Employee pay seems to become more important for retention, relatively, when other retention factors are lacking. For example, an LHJ with “low pay” may not have as much trouble with retention if they do not have competing employers or if they have strong benefits packages or community ties. If other retention factors are lacking, poor pay seems to grow in significance. Conversely, good pay, can, to some extent, make up for the lack of some retention factors like

community relationships, union involvement, flexible scheduling, or varied, interesting work. While salary is not the only factor in workforce retention, it is significant.

<p>Examples of what interviewees from various LHJs meant by “good pay”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The compensation keeps employees there. - Salaries are competitive - They give merit increases in pay. - The salary scale includes longevity pay - Used to have more turnover, but they increased salary, since then, they have a bit more stability in their workforce. - Pay is very good for the area and also for the state. - They conduct salary surveys to keep salary up-to-date for cost of living - They review and compare salaries to stay on the level of similar sized agencies
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When interviewees spoke of the pay or benefits they offered as “good,” they had varying standards. Some meant pay or benefits are good when compared to other jobs available in the county. Some interviewees also meant pay or benefits are good when compared to neighboring LHJs or even on a state standard. See the adjoining box for specific examples of how interviewees described “good pay.”

“Good pay” that contributes to workforce retention (as described in the box above) appears to have a few main qualifications.

- 1) It is not static
- 2) It is competitive on a scale that is relevant

to the individual LHJ, whether that be local, regional, or state-wide.

- 3) It is likely based on an inquiry in to need and/or competitors’ salaries.

The interviewees spoke generally about “benefits” as a major factor in retaining employees. A few listed specific types of benefits that they felt were important. The box to below presents those examples.

The most common type of “good benefit” interviewees described was health insurance in various forms. The next most important, in terms of how much interviewees talked about it, was retirement or pension. Whereas all of the benefits they listed contributed to retention, health insurance and retirement benefits appeared to be most significant.

As was mentioned above, “low pay” can make retaining employees a major challenge for LHJs. When an LHJ offers “low pay,” employees are more likely to seek jobs with other employers who can pay more. As one interviewee explained, **it was difficult because there was not enough funding available to pay people what they are worth considering the amount of training and education many LHJ employees have had.** People had the option of taking their education and skills to other settings or industries and receiving better

<p>How interviewees from various LHJs referred to “good benefits”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Benefits are pretty good for the area. There aren’t a lot of jobs in the area with benefits. They include medical, retirement, and others. - The county gives a good benefits package relative to other counties - It is desirable to work for the county, because the workforce is stable an there are good benefits <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 100% health coverage - Medical benefits that cover the family - Medical savings account - Low copays - Flexible maternity policy - Retirement / Pension (Some employees stay on because they have already invested so much time into their pension and they do not want to loose that.) - LHJ pays for license and certification renewals. - Assist with transportation costs for employees - Special employee assistance programs such as home mortgage assistance, savings bonds, or ill child care.

compensation.

LHJs are restricted in what they are able to pay employees for a number of reasons. First, simply, LHJs have limited budgets. Second, many LHJs are bound to their county pay scale and have little control over pay levels. One interviewee said that their county had a small tax base, so they had very limited funding and limited ability to increase salaries. Other interviewees whose LHJs were not on a county pay scale also talked about their limited salaries. For example, some talked about being mainly grant funded. Because they depended upon grants they did not have a stable source of funding and felt restricted in the amount of salaries they offer. Limited salaries made employee retention very challenging.

Low pay is a challenge to LHJs also because it keeps them from being more competitive employers. Private industry pays more than LHJs in every instance interviewees mentioned. Many public health employees are attracted to private industry employment opportunities. Also, sometimes other public health agencies who offer better pay are competitors. LHJs may lose employees to other, usually larger, LHJs or to the DOH.

Other pay-related issues that interviewees brought up include unions. Some interviewees (who were non-union agency leaders) said their LHJs were limited in their ability to offer bonuses as a result of union restrictions. One in particular had attempted to institute merit pay, and had not been able to. Managers who can not be in unions also encountered problems with limited pay. Without a bargaining unit pushing for increase salaries, interviewees felt managers' salary have not grown proportionately.

To reverse the workforce loss as a result of low salaries, some LHJs have conducted cost-of living surveys to investigate their salary weaknesses. This information has helped them decide how to best handle the salary-related retention problems. In a few cases LHJs that had higher turnover increased salary, and subsequently had more stability in their workforce.

Some interviewees expect salaries to become a greater problem in the future, because funding continues to tighten. As budgets are squeezed and public health jobs require more skills and education, the dilemma of low salaries will intensify.

Promotion

One of the greatest challenges to workforce retention in public health in Washington is that there are limited opportunities for advancement or promotion in most LHJs. More interviewees spoke of it as their greatest challenge or weakness to employee retention than those who spoke of salary or benefits. In some cases, LHJs have no career ladder, while others have a structure that allows only limited opportunity for promotion.

Sometimes the lack of promotion opportunities was a result of the county policy. One interviewee, when referring to their county's restrictions, explained "The county does not allow staff to climb the career ladder." In other cases, LHJs have no opportunities for promotion because of the LHJ's small size. Some LHJs have no opportunities for promotion because of their staffing structure, with "few promotable jobs" or not enough depth or specialization that

allow people to laterally transfer. Regardless of the reason for the lack of promotion, it led to similar results: employee frustration and problems with retention.

In light of all else the interviewees had said, the lack of promotion opportunities takes shape. Generally, turnover is low in LHJs and many people stay in their jobs for many years, especially in more rural areas where there are few other employment opportunities for professionals. The result is that “there are not opportunities for upward mobility unless someone retires or dies.” Furthermore, in some counties the recruitment policy requires them to advertise every open position to the public, which means employers can not offer the possibility of promotion as a reward to hardworking employees. When it is difficult for agency leaders to ensure the possibility of promotion and it is impossible for staff in many LHJs to work towards advancement, it presents a major stumbling block to workforce motivation and retention. People are more likely to move leave for positions where they do have access to a career ladder.

One interviewee said his/her LHJ could conceivably restructure their staff to improve their performance and offer promotion as an opportunity for top performers and promising staff members, but unions are a hindrance. They require the LHJ to promote the most senior of the internal persons who has at least the minimum acceptable skills. So, again, the motivation of possible promotion is absent for staff.

The challenge promotion presents, while widespread and important, is not ubiquitous. Some [larger] LHJs are structured so that they have internal opportunities for advancement, or at least

One interviewee, when talking about making changes to create more opportunities for advancement, said “if we have [the option of] career ladders, let’s use them.”

lateral job changes at the same level. One interviewee stated it as one of his organization’s strength’s that their employees felt like they can stay there and have opportunities to move up (except for clerical positions). They also encouraged training to enable promotion. Other interviewees specifically said that their **in-house recruiting helps with workforce retention.**

Scheduling

Interviewees frequently mentioned employee work schedules as a factor that contributed to workforce retention. Work schedules in LHJs appeared to have two main appealing qualities: they were dependable and they often were flexible.

“I think that our hours are good. Employees can predict when they are going to work. It’s 8 to 5 everyday. They’re never required to work weekends or holidays. They have an hour for lunch everyday. It is the predictable things that make [working here] a good fit for some people, especially our nurses.” This type of statement came up a number of times, mainly with reference to nurses. Compared to jobs in hospitals, work in a public health agency is more stable and dependable. It gives jobs in LHJs appeal for some nurses.

Scheduling flexibility appears to be a common but minor factor in LHJ workforce retention. Many interviewees spoke of scheduling flexibility but did not list it among their most important retention efforts. Schedule flexibility for LHJs may include:

- being respectful of requests for time off

- being able to flex hours (variable time schedule, as needed)
- being understanding of family needs and commitments
- a compressed work week
- telecommuting (only mentioned once)
- allowing lots of time off

More than once an interviewee mentioned that they would like to offer more flexible schedules, but they are unable to because their staff is too small.

Workplace

The “work environment” was one of the factors interviewees thought their employees most valued. The work environment, as they described, may include staff relations, the general office environment, and the nature of the LHJ as an employer. When interviewees spoke of a positive work environment, they used terms such as “team” and “cohesion” and “supportive.” In many cases, the interviewees were proud of the work environment they had in their LHJ. Some of them had worked hard to help create a positive work environment.

<p>“We make sure they have a workplace that works for them and that is not creating the frustration.”</p>

One individual described her LHJ as a “vibrant, dynamic workplace.” S/he described the work they do as “progressive” and “forward thinking.” People want to work there, s/he said, to be a part of that setting and their work.

The following factors are examples aspects of a positive work environment that various interviewees mentioned:

- They have a team atmosphere office-wide.
- They actively work at team-building.
- They have workplace harmony and cohesion.
- They conduct full staff meetings
- Staff members honor one another at staff meetings “for going above and beyond.”
- Their positions have a high level of stability.
- Everyone is respectful of family needs and issues.
- It is a desirable employer in the county.
- They are working on improving the work setting and facilities.
- Staff is encouraged to get involved in the community.
- They have a wellness program.
- They have a workplace safety program (they keep track of accidents and try to find ways to prevent them).
- They have a good orientation program, both to the job and to the site.

Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the importance of their workplace being family friendly. Factors that make a work place family friendly may include a good maternity policy, schedules that allow employees to meet family obligations, and social activities that bring together staff and their families. Interviewees spoke of a family friendly workplace both as a positive workplace attribute for the whole staff and as a specific factor regarding nurse retention. More

than one interviewee felt their workplace was more family friendly than the local hospitals that were competing nurse employers.

As was mentioned before, another aspect of the work place that helps retain employees is that the LHJ or the county is considered a good employer. A number of interviewees talked about it. It may be because of pay or benefits, but it may also be because the employer is known in the county for doing good work and for treating their employees fairly. Furthermore, in some LHJs, they are considered a desirable place to work because the jobs are dependable, especially in cases where they have been successful at securing grants or other sources of additional funding.

One interviewee explained that at his/her LHJ, it contribute to retention to have a collegial environment and people who enjoy their work. They do their best to make sure to hire people who will mesh well with their workplace. From what interviewees said, if LHJs hire people who will not only be able to do the work, but will also fit into the staff as a team member, it will help with retention for all staff.

A few people interviewed talked about a poor work environment and how it has affected their retention. They described poor staff cohesion, staff conflict, or poor work place communication. A couple talked about problems with specific groups within the LHJ, such as clerical staff or the environmental health group, which has affected retention for the entire organization. One individual talked about staff conflict and explained that their LHJ staff probably needed an active team building effort. Those who spoke of negative work environments all said that it was a weakness for them regarding workforce retention.

Staff-Manager Relationships and Expectations

“My experience has been that with professional folks, they rise to the highest level you allow them and often exceed it.”

“[We] try to develop a work environment that encourages independence and creativity.”

“I recognize that it’s not how long your bum sits in a chair, but how long your brain is present.”

Relationships between staff and their managers are an important component of retaining a good workforce. All of the interviewees were in leadership positions. They spoke of how they treated their staff or interacted with them and how they thought that affected retention.

A number of interviewees stated that they found value, with regards to retention, in inviting employee input into the organization and its activities. One individual said they had developed a strategic plan and involved the staff in the process. Another said that the LHJ does not make sweeping changes without involving “the team.” Another interviewee said that they invite staff to tell them what they need or want for training or for work goals, then they try to work with staff for those needs. They include staff in department decision-making and internal workings.

While interviewees talked about staff-manager relationship recommendations in general terms (“give praise,” “show appreciation”) they tended to give these activities importance. See the box on the next page for a list of management practices interviewees found most helpful. In a few cases, LHJs without formal retention efforts said this type of encouragement was their only direct effort for retention. Informal retention activities **are beneficial and have the advantage of being a low-cost retention technique for LHJs.**

In the way interviewees spoke of supportive leadership practices an element of balance seems to be important. Managers wanted to encourage staff, give them autonomy, and hold them to high standards so people felt pride and confidence in their work and the quality of the staff. At the same time, some seemed cautious about pushing too hard. They did not want to risk losing employees because of the difficulty they have with recruitment.

Management practices interviewees found most helpful for workforce retention:

- Trusting staff to be in charge of their own work.
- Allowing staff some self-determination.
- Helping staff see the value of their work and feel appreciated for it.
- Giving people public recognition and credit for achievements, for example to commissioners.
- Trying not to micromanage their work.
- Making sure staff feels included in decisions and activities.
- Managers and director having an open door policy for staff.
- Trying to give people tasks they are interested in.
- Making sure every employee knows how they fit into the mission and how they contribute to public health.
- Encourage people to feel proud of work.
- Give verbal praise.
- Treat employees fairly.

Nature of the Work

A number of interviewees explained that the nature of the work in public health helps them retain good employees. A couple interviewees mentioned this specifically with reference to nurses. They said the work tends to be varied and challenging with opportunities for autonomous decision making. Some agency leaders think it is beneficial that the work is not routine. They may actively make sure employees are challenged and have enough to do, for example by restructuring duties. They also may try to make sure the top performers get new opportunities. “We are working on trying to make sure the top performers get challenging programs so they don’t get too bored.”

One LHJ had a twenty-step **method of reward to** encourage employees to improve their work and their work place. It is a. Each of the twenty steps includes 2.5% pay increase. The first ten steps are automatic, one each year. A motivated employee could advance faster. The next ten steps are contingent on special effort; they are “quality” steps. Staff members consult with supervisors or managers to identify weaknesses in themselves or the organization. They develop a plan to improve weaknesses they identify. Examples have included developing skills and expanding services. If they complete the improvements, they can get approved for a step and another 2.5% pay increase. By the time a staff member achieves all twenty steps, they could be

making 150% of what others in their positioning the state are making. The interviewee explained that this approach encourages people to recognize need and get training and improve skills.

Communication

While only a few interviewees specifically mentioned “strong communication” as a retention factor, many spoke of it in various contexts. They spoke of intra-staff interactions and staff-supervisor communication. They spoke of the importance of LHM leaders giving feedback, verbal praise, and constructive criticism. As mentioned in staff-manager relationships, some leaders welcome employee input. Generally, **open communication in an LHM seems to be an important underlying factor in retention.**

A few directors talked about communication as a key component for workforce retention. One said s/he had improved communication channels in the department, so staff knew what was going on and felt like they were more likely to be heard when they gave feedback. Another spoke of how well-regarded his/her open-door policy was among staff and supervisors. Another explained that because of the open communication channels they have in the LHM, the staff was free to express their concerns, and the director was able to understand staff and supervisors’ problems, which enabled him/her to do more about them. Communication is important for workforce retention because it helps the staff feel heard, valued and like part of a team.

Management

Managers can be a major, direct factor in retaining good employees according to some interviewees. On the other hand, interviewees said poor managers has caused employee turnover. One interviewee described having seen both situations within one LHM: good managers helped keep good employees; poor managers led to workforce loss.

Strong, accountable managers who have helped maintain a strong workforce had a few specific features. Interviewees described them as managers who:

- Are well trained.
- Are held to a high standard by agency leaders.
- Holds staff to high standards.
- Help staff feel pride in their work.
- Treat staff well.
- Are accountable to their staff as well as to agency leaders.
- Are fair.
- Set clear expectations for staff.
- Communicate well with staff.

Interviewees said that some LHM employees have left their jobs because of their managers. Interviewees described three manager main problem areas they have observed. First, sometimes, managers or agency leaders are detached from their staff who, in turn, may not be strongly tied to the organization or its mission. Second, **when managers do not evaluate the staff and give them enough feedback, staff may feel undervalued.** Also, a lack of performance evaluation hinders the agency leaders’ or human resources’ ability to set goals. Third, managers who do not

make thorough work plans or give adequate guidance keep staff from feeling confident in their work.

Another very important aspect of management to consider with regard to workforce retention is the fact that LHJ managers and leaders themselves are retiring or moving on to other positions. Some interviewees expressed concern over replacing managers. Many stated that most of their managers had been in their jobs for a number of years and they have not been cultivating potential new managers. When referring to manager longevity, one interviewee explained that their LHJ has had such good general retention that they were worried about people moving up into management positions who have never worked anywhere else and who did not have broad experiences.

Unions

Interviewees, who were agency leaders and presented a one-sided view of LHJ-union relationships, described unions' affect on workforce retention both positively and negatively. Some said that unions had improved workforce retention in their LHJs by helping employees get better pay or benefits. On the other hand, some interviewees said that unions placed restrictions on internal policy that limited their freedom to implement retention-oriented activities. One individual gave the example of when a manager is performing poorly, they are unable to remove that individual and consider promoting someone into the management position because of union regulations. Another individual explained that it was a hindrance to retention that they can not award staff merit with better pay because of the union. A third individual, mentioned above, said that unions prevent them from using promotion as a reward to top performing staff. While unions were not a top priority for interviewees for either retention assets or challenges, they played an important role.

The Community and LHJs

Many interviewees said that when LHJ staff **developed relationships with the local community**, those relationships contributed to workforce retention. One explained, "People in the department have not only a role in department but also a role in the community." Another interviewee said they encourage staff to walk for exercise in town and to participate in local sports. Personal relationships and community involvement help the LHJ build stronger ties to the community it serves and may help connect employees to the place in which they live and work. Personal relationships with a friendly community help retain employees. Encouraging employees to get involved in their community is a retention effort that LHJs with limited ability to implement retention activities can use.

The prior information about recruitment includes a discussion of rural locations which is relevant to our current discussion of communities. A community's rural-ness may play a role in workforce retention. One interviewee stated, "It is a rural area, which helps us retain employees, because there are few other options in the area where our employees could work." In particular, in some rural places there are no competing employers for the LHJs' professional staff.

The County

Because of their county system, some interviewees felt their hands were somewhat tied in retention activities. They felt that because their LHJs depended upon their county HR and pay scale, the amount of decisive power LHH leaders have over developing retention programs was limited.

One interviewee described the county system as “a cumbersome traditional organization.” Their county government was too “stretched” and did not focus on public health or the needs of the professionals they hired for public health. The interviewee explained that county HR was not adept at recruiting professionals. Also, the county system did not have the necessary retention structure in place for professionals. The interviewee said sometimes employees made requests, such as for flexing time, that were the county did not permit and the department had to decide whether to make allowances for employees, despite the county.

Another interviewee talked about the challenge that local bureaucracy poses for public health professionals. “They are working in a practical realm, but the decisions that control them are made in political realm. They may feel micromanaged.” Bureaucracy has made it difficult to retain professionals.

Also, an interviewee said that their LHH’s relationship with its local Board of Health affected workforce retention. The BOH made decisions that led to workforce reduction. That caused the rest of the staff to worry about their jobs and feel less comfortable in the workplace. Some other staff members considered finding new jobs with more security. A county’s political environment may be a challenge for LHH retention.

Other Factors

Interviewees mentioned a variety of other factors related to workforce retention that were specific to their situation, but may hold a wider relevance. These include:

- Keeping up with technology. An interviewee said working with up-to-date technology motivates their employees. “When you can provide employees what they need to get the job done, through technology, you reap a valuable reward through that.”
- Condition of the facilities. The “facility should emulate the standards that a citizen would expect to see” in an LHH. The interviewee explained that a lack of space and shoddy office appearance hinders retention.
- Transportation benefits. Ease or difficulty of transportation to work is a factor in workforce retention for a couple LHJs. They have done things such as give out bus passes or provide free parking to employees.
- That they *need* to keep their employees. One interviewee said the fact that they could not afford to lose employees gave the employees leverage and had potential to upset work or cooperation in their LHH.
- They have trouble examining workforce needs, trends, or problems that might help them plan for retention because they lacked human resource staff, one interviewee said.

Why employees leave

“One nurse we hired who was a great nurse, we tried to explain that one of the things in public health was that a lot of the decisions and activities that we make are very independent. She said that her whole professional life as a nurse, she thought she wanted that, but now that it comes down to making those kind of important decisions, it’s a lot harder than what it seems. There can be a lot of stress in the work people do in public health considering all the decisions they have to make.”

While some interviewees told stories such as the one above when they were asked about why people have left their LHJ, this is merely one example among a wide variety. People left their jobs at LHJs for an array of reasons. Sometimes they were attracted by other LHJs. Sometimes they left their jobs for the private sector (hospitals, contractors, etc). Some people were not well suited for the job or the organization and either left or are terminated. People often left because of family or other personal reasons. Some left because of job dissatisfaction. And, of course, many left because of retirement. Of all the explanations interviewees gave, personal reasons and retirement were the most common impetus behind employees leaving LHJs.

Employees also left LHJs because, as described in the recruitment information earlier in this report, sometimes they took jobs at LHJs planning to only stay for two to four years. Such employees sought the position to gain experience. While interviewees seemed understanding that a person would want to do this, many of them were not pleased with the situation and preferred that employees stayed for a career.

Retirement and the Aging workforce

Employee retirement is both a major factor in current employee turnover and the greatest recruitment and retention concern of the future for LHJs. Many interviewees referred to the current state of the workforce as “aging.” A few explain that their staff was composed mainly of people who were relatively new and those who had spent a career there (one individuals said their staff was less than 8 years or more than 15 on the job). For some LHJs, retirement is already a tremendous concern and is causing recruitment strain. As the workforce retires increasingly over the coming decade, LHJ will loose their experienced staff and have significant staff and leadership gaps to fill.

One of the last questions interviewees answered was how they see recruitment and retention changing in the future. By far, the most common issue mentioned was related to retirement and an aging workforce. Here are a few examples of the responses they gave.

- The aging workforce will be a big problem. When our nurses who have been doing this for years and have so much experience begin retiring, we will loose a wealth of institutional memory and skills.
- Nearly one third of our department is up for retirement in the next ten years.
- Retirement of key staff and agency leaders will be a major future concern. We are not yet planning for how to replace the workforce that will be leaving. We need to begin dealing with this soon.
- We will have a problem finding other local employees when the current employees retire.

- **We need to ask how we should be nurturing from within. With a number of retirements in coming decade, replacing management is our main concern. We need good management training programs from the state. We need access to a well-thought-out program to train people how to manage others in a professional environment. We need to do better to take advantage of the fact that we have so many people in public health who are committed to what they do. And we need to keep people motivated who are already in the organization.**

Recruitment for Retention

Some of the interviewees talked about the link between good recruiting and good retention. They were using conscientious recruitment as a means to improve employee retention. One interviewee said their LHJ had “low turnover because [they] are careful about who [they] choose.” Examples of using recruitment to improve retention they mentioned include:

- Actively recruiting current employees to give them an opportunity for advanced positions
- Recruiting local people who already have a strong connection to the location and the community so they will be more likely to stay long-term.
- Choosing candidates who are strongly interested in public health’s mission so they will be more dedicated to their work
- Choosing candidates who will be collegial and fit into in the office environment.

In the interviews there was a broad sense that the people who worked in public health often had similarities. Interviewees talked about how people are “here because they want to be here” – because they believe in the work. Once people got into the interesting, important work of public health, they tend to like it. Other interviewees talked about being careful to hire individuals who genuinely seem to want to “make a difference.” By being selective about the type of people they hired for their LHJ and getting people who care about the work and the community they found they improved workforce retention.

How it will change in future

As previously mentioned, as a part of the interview, individuals shared their ideas on how public health and workforce recruitment and retention issues will change in the future. In response to the question, they spoke most of the aging and shrinking workforce. Similarly, they spoke of the aging population and their growing needs for public health services. They worry that their capacity is not increasing as is needed to meet population growth needs.

Interviewees also anticipated growing competition for skilled employees. For example, they see a growing demand in public health for skills related to community relations and cultural competence in those skilled fields. “Soon we’ll be looking for social workers with science degrees,” said one interviewee of the needs s/he sees in the environmental health workforce. The shift in necessary skills will contribute to recruitment and retention difficulty.

Other skills for which they see a growing need included preparedness and technological capability. LHJs will need to recruit employees with skills they have not sought very much in the past. They will also be creating new positions to meet the need of growing and changing

communities. Interviewees recognize that the workforce will shift and that schools of public health will have to work to keep up with LHJs' changing needs.

In the future in public health at the local level, interviewees predict technology will have a greater impact on how and where they work. More work will be done from the field with mobile technology. Telecommuting will become more common, as will hotelling (setting up a working space in a remote location, but not within the employee's home). Information technology will have to improve to keep up with the technology needed to provide services. "Technology will have a great impact on how we do business, on our accountability, and on our accessibility."

With improved technology, such as PDAs, the workforce can be more mobile and may need less office space. Also, LHJs may contract out more for certain tasks and need fewer full-time employees, which would also decrease the need for office space. LHJs could become more decentralized with employees spending less time at the central office.

Interviewees worried about increasing legally mandated responsibilities for public health agencies, especially regarding preparedness, that come with too little funding and support. Some also worried about the fact that public health work will soon require more licensure and specialization. These changes will make recruitment much more challenging, especially for rural places.

To get ready for the future of public health workforce recruitment and retention in Washington, interviewees recommend:

- Getting more people to attend schools of public health and offering more scholarships.
- Offering shorter courses to train people with science or health care degrees in public health specific skills.
- Succession planning to be prepared when leadership retire.
- Partnering more with other community organizations and agencies to be more effective and meet community needs.
- Sharing specialists or people with specialized skills among LHJs.

Reflections

LHJs' individual needs with regards to turnover and retention were diverse. For example, a few interviewees said that they found good, dedicated workers. That contributed to their workforce retention because those individuals tended to stay, and it helped attract other good employees. Others described being in a cycle of finding people who did not work out or who did not stay long. "The people we get tend to want to move on to other jobs with better pay or professional development." Because individual LHJs' situation varies so significantly, it would be difficult to make sweeping, state-wide improvements. It seems that any program that addresses public health workforce retention in Washington would have to, at least to some extent, allow individuals LHJs to address their own needs and situation.

The approaches or practices interviewees listed as their most successful or effective for retaining good workers varied from one LHJ to the next. Considering retention primarily in terms of pay scales and benefits misses many aspects of public health workforce retention in Washington. While this overview allows insight into a range of perspectives and helps us understand those

perspectives, it gives little information about the success or measurable value of various types of retention efforts. The information presented in this report does not allow us to easily make generalizable recommendations but, rather, it allows us to share promising practices, fresh ideas, and low cost approaches among LHJs.

The division between how interviewees referred to their turnover and how they spoke of their retention was interesting. While many said that retention was not as much of a concern as recruitment (the average for the informal 1-5 scale was lower), a number of interviewees either directly said or implied that they were not satisfied with their retention efforts or that they did not do enough. Essentially, it seems as though they are saying that while the amount of turnover is not high, turnover can be very challenging when it does happen, and preventing turnover requires effort.

Though LHJs did not feel especially stressed over retention demands, they are concerned over the future. Interviewees expect that it will be increasingly difficult to retain good employees over time and that turnover will increase. Not only will retirement be a great blow to the state's public health workforce, but the job market will become more competitive.

Lessons Learned

If interviewees' expectation that turnover and retention will become more of a challenge in the coming years is true, we should increase our current efforts to prepare for it, especially with regards to changing leadership. In light of this information, the need for **succession planning** and **increase funding for retention-improving measuring** such as salary, benefits, and technology grows. Furthermore, the future trend calls for improved public health workforce recruitment capabilities across the state, so that the state can competitively address public health's future workforce needs.

Not all tactics that LHJ could use to improve retention require significant financial commitment. Just as there are creative, low resource ways to recruit employees, there are also **low-resource approaches that can contribute to retention**. Many LHJs already incorporate relatively low-resource approaches. Low-resource approaches to retention include building strong two-way communication within LHJs, improving manager-staff relations, structuring jobs to make them more appropriate and interesting, adjusting schedules, encouraging community involvement, and allowing employee self-determination. Some of these approaches the interviewees thought to be significant contributors to retention.

Retention efforts may be differentiate not only between low-resource and high-resource approaches, but also between formalized and non-formalized retention approaches. In cases where the county system is restrictive, LHJs still **have retention options that they may conduct informally internally**, many of then mentioned in the previous paragraph. While a formal policy or program such as rewarding by steps may work well, other approaches such as working internally to improve relationships and communication, and inviting more employee input may also be very helpful.

From what interviewees relayed, retention efforts that may help all LHJs might be broken into a few categories.

- 1) Gathering information
- 2) Planning ahead
- 3) Involving the staff
- 4) Working towards change

Gathering Information. It will help LHJs to know more about their weaknesses. If LHJs learn more about the degree to which the salaries and benefits they offer employees are insufficient, they will be better able to make decisions or take action to at least begin to improve the situation. For example, they may conduct cost-of-living surveys or local salary inquiries (learn more about competitors). Such information would help them assess the pay “gap” between them and their competitors.

It benefits LHJ employers to understand why they loose employees. Few interviewees felt they had access to good turnover records. If LHJs kept records of their employee turnover and conduct internal exit interviews, they would better understand employees’ dissatisfaction. They would be better equipped to choose approaches to improve workforce retention.

Planning ahead. Most interviewees spoke of their concern over future employee retirement and increasing competition for employees. The more plans and structures an LHJ has in place in advance, the better prepared they will be to recruit new employees and replace agency leaders when turnover occurs. Succession plans, developing relationships with colleges and universities, and improving recruitment and retention policy are examples of actions that will help LHJs be better prepared for impending turnover.

Involving the staff. In a variety of instances, interviewees felt that involving and engaging the staff contributed to retention. Agency leaders could involve staff and supervisors in communication, decision-making, strategic planning, finding areas for agency improvement, and group activities. They can get involved in community activities. Managers can also involve the staff in their own improvement by conducting regular staff evaluations and sharing the results with the staff members.

Working towards change. As interviewees explained, many retention issues such as pay, benefits, and opportunities for promotion are difficult to change. That does not mean LHJs should not try or begin a process of change. LHJs could perhaps:

- Work with counties or unions to change policy to allow the possibility of employee promotion. One interviewee expressed displeasure over “playin the good ‘ole boys game” that was needed to effect change in the county, but knew the effort was important.
- Work with county government to increase employee pay or benefits. As one interview explained they used to have more turnover, but they worked with the county to increase salaries, and since then, they have a bit more stability in their workforce.
- Promote and market themselves in their county or region to help them be better known as a career option to youth and as desirable employer. That some LHJs are recognized as desirable employers was presented as a more significant factor in recruitment and retention than many might think.

The interviews taught us that, just as with recruitment, there is no apparent silver bullet to “fix” public health workforce retention. Most likely a combination of retention efforts and approaches is the most reasonable solution to retention problems until we know more about what works best.

Included in this document is a variety of approaches to retention that have worked for various LHJs. Hopefully, LHJs can find ideas, learn approaches, or gain motivation from learning what their colleagues have done.

IV. CONCLUSION

By making plans, keeping workforce records and analyzing internal processes, LHJs can determine ways to make their recruitment more efficient. For retention, LHJs could use a combination of suggested methods until they know individually more about what works best for them. Sharing successful practices with each other could help all LHJs with recruitment and retention. Included in this document is a variety of approaches to recruitment and retention that LHJs recommend. Hopefully, LHJs can find ideas, learn approaches or gain motivation from learning what their colleagues have done.

The interviews demonstrate that there is no apparent silver bullet to “fix” public health workforce recruitment and retention. LHJs have varying needs. At the same time, regional and statewide coordination on some activities may help broadly improve recruitment and retention.

This report contains LHJs’ concerns, successes, and recommendations for workforce recruitment and retention in the state of Washington. The information presented here may be directly useful for local health jurisdictions and broadly informative for the Washington State Department of Health and the PHIP Workforce Development Committee. This report is intended to be a practical document. Future work to improve public health workforce recruitment and retention should be able to use and build upon the information local public health leaders shared.