

# THE DEFINITION AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH NURSING

2013

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# THE DEFINITION AND PRACTICE OF PUBLIC HEALTH NURSING

A Statement of the APHA Public Health Nursing Section

2013

This document updates the 1996 American Public Health Association Public Health Nursing Section definition statement and affirms the original definition.<sup>1</sup> This statement addresses some of the evolving economic, health, political, and societal trends that shape the context of public health nursing practice.

## Definition

***Public health nursing is the practice of promoting and protecting the health of populations using knowledge from nursing, social, and public health sciences.***

Public health nursing is a specialty practice within nursing and public health. It focuses on improving population health by emphasizing prevention, and attending to multiple determinants of health. Often used interchangeably with community health nursing, this nursing practice includes advocacy, policy development, and planning, which addresses issues of social justice. With a multi-level view of health, public health nursing action occurs through community applications of theory, evidence, and a commitment to health equity. In addition to what is put forward in this definition, public health nursing practice is guided by the American Nurses Association *Public Health Nursing: Scope & Standards of Practice*<sup>2</sup> and the Quad Council of Public Health Nursing Organizations' *Core Competencies for Public Health Nurses*.<sup>3</sup>

## Elements of Practice

Key characteristics of practice include: 1) a focus on the health needs of an entire population, including inequities and the unique needs of sub-populations; 2) assessment of population health using a comprehensive, systematic approach; 3) attention to multiple determinants of health; 4) an emphasis on primary prevention; and 5) application of interventions at all levels—individuals, families, communities, and the systems that impact their health.<sup>4</sup>

## *Public Health Nursing Perspective*

Public health nursing aims to improve the health outcomes of all populations. Applying their clinical knowledge and expertise in health care from an ecological perspective, public health nurses acknowledge the complexity of public health problems and the contextual nature of health—including cultural, environmental, historical, physical, and social factors. Public health nurses apply systems-level thinking<sup>5</sup> to assess the potential or actual assets, needs, opportunities, and inequities of individuals, families, and populations and translate this assessment into action for public good.

## *Public Health Nursing Activities and Practice Settings*

Public health nursing activities comprise the domains depicted by the *Public Health Intervention Wheel* and the *10 Essential Public Health Services*.<sup>7,8</sup> These activities include community collaboration, health teaching, and policy development, in response to priorities derived from ongoing, comprehensive population focused assessment. Public health nurses are members and leaders of interprofessional teams in diverse settings and in many different types of agencies and organizations including all levels of

government, community-based and other nongovernmental service organizations, foundations, policy think tanks, academic institutions and other research settings. Increasing numbers of public health nurses work in global health in an effort to promote global responsibility and connectivity. Public health nurses that work with individuals and families do so within the context of a population focus—applying a systems perspective to factors that impact health.

### *Determinants of Health*

Eliminating population health disparities by addressing multiple determinants that lead to poor health is a national goal.<sup>9</sup> Public health nurses are in a position to provide leadership through public policy reform efforts, community-building, and system-level change.<sup>10</sup> Environmental, physical, and social determinants explain most health disparities in the United States.<sup>11,12,13,14,15</sup> Socioeconomic disadvantages such as poverty, low levels of education, and belonging to a racial or ethnic minority group, are more robust risk factors of poor health than a lack of access to health care or predominantly genetic factors of disease.<sup>16,17,18</sup> While the discipline of nursing was founded on improving environmental conditions to facilitate health at the bedside,<sup>19</sup> public health nurses focus on improving population health in the environments where people live, work, learn, and play.

### **Opportunities & Challenges**

Adherence to public health nursing's key characteristics requires that the practice must evolve to address current societal needs. Public health nursing has faced multiple challenges over its history while engaging in leadership opportunities that have shaped nursing practice, addressing environmental and social justice issues, affecting population health, and exploring health promotion concepts. One example is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA).<sup>20</sup> The ACA has greatly altered the landscape for health care and health improvement in the U.S., creating the potential for new public health nursing roles and responsibilities. The ACA includes goals to 1) improve the individual health care experience; 2) reduce the cost of health care; and 3) improve the health of populations. With their positions embedded within communities, public health nurses are vital to the interprofessional teams needed to assure that all people have equitable access to high quality care and healthy environments through health system reform.<sup>21</sup> Their assessment skills, primary prevention focus, and system-level perspectives can assure that local and state needs are met, services and programs are coordinated, and communities are engaged.

Public health nurses are prepared to lead efforts that align emerging systems of care for population health improvement, health promotion, risk reduction, and disease prevention efforts that are within the nucleus of a reformed health system. Fewer public health nursing positions and decreased public health funding influence leadership roles and access to health care in communities.<sup>22</sup> Within the context of healthcare reform these challenges offer opportunities to emphasize a strong, well-educated public health nursing workforce to lead and carry out system coordination and change at local, state, national, and international levels.<sup>23</sup>

An emerging healthcare model that requires public health nursing leadership is the integration of primary care and public health.<sup>24</sup> Primary care and public health share a focus on prevention, population health, transitional care, and care coordination across settings to promote health through collaboration. With a unique focus from individuals and families to populations and systems, public health nurses are well

positioned to integrate new health system models and meet the demands of an ever-changing health system.<sup>25</sup>

### **Public Health Nursing Education**

The baccalaureate degree in nursing (BSN) is recommended for entry-level public health nurses.<sup>26</sup> *The Essentials of Baccalaureate Education for Professional Nursing Practice* emphasize fundamental concepts for public health nursing practice such as clinical prevention, population health, healthcare policy, finance, and regulatory environments, and interprofessional collaboration.<sup>27</sup> The graduate is prepared to conduct community assessments and apply the principles of epidemiology among other competencies.

Nurses with a master's degree or higher, and with specialization in population health, demonstrate the knowledge and skills required for leadership positions. Competencies include mastery of interprofessional collaboration, health policy and advocacy, population assessment, prevention strategies, and program planning and evaluation.<sup>28</sup> The doctor of nursing practice (DNP) degree, with a public health emphasis, has emerged in the last decade, and provides the foundation for advanced practice in executive leadership, systems development, and the translation of research into practice. The doctor of philosophy (PhD) and other research-focused doctoral degrees remain the preparation for public health nurses to develop the science relevant to public health nursing and to generate the evidence needed to guide practice. In some states a public health nursing certification is needed to signify a nurse's specific competence and expertise in public health nursing. National advanced public health nursing certification is available via portfolio assessment through American Nurses Credentialing Center.

### **Summary**

Public health nurses provide leadership for emerging advances in population health and health care—particularly in terms of addressing health inequities. Equipped with a baccalaureate degree or higher, public health nurses are prepared to address multiple determinants of health and participate fully in the challenges of attaining and maintaining population health. With a scope of practice that includes community-building, health promotion, policy reform, and system-level changes to promote and protect the health of populations; public health nurses have an essential role and responsibility as leaders in health improvement and promoting health equity.

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