

Domain 4: Key Informant Viewpoints and Recommendations for SEPHLI

This section addresses the findings from interviewees with five key informants from North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia. They were asked to provide first-hand accounts of the influence of SEPHLI on its graduates, and subsequently on the impact of public health in their respective states.

Summary of Findings

Interviewees commented on four topics:

- **Their expectations and hopes for the program**, such as increased ability to convey problems to legislatures and the general public, an increased ability to obtain funding, a broader perspective on the leadership aspects of their job and on ways to influence public health, an enhanced understanding of how to employ their pre-existing leadership skills to accomplish goals, and a greater exposure to other fields in public health.
- **The benefits of SEPHLI** on individual, network, and program, organizational, systems, and policy levels. On the individual level, stakeholders have observed graduates developing professionally through promotions, working together more effectively, broadening their understanding, and communicating more effectively particularly with the legislature. Other skills observed included an enhanced understanding of systems thinking, risk communication, and facilitation, which in one case led to development of a surveillance and outbreak investigation program.

Benefits observed surrounding professional network development were not as numerous as predicted. Stakeholders believed that having both state and local leaders attend SEPHLI improves relationships and that those collaborations may foster program, system, organization, and policy changes. Stakeholders had difficulty identifying specific infrastructure or policy benefits, explaining that they have not had the opportunity to talk with SEPHLI graduates about the program's benefits, or that they do not interact with most of them on a regular basis.

- **Concerns about SEPHLI**, including a fear that the program would not be able to continue as a result of states' lack of participation or a lack of overall funding. Additionally, there was one concern that the program would be perceived as elitist, due to its participant selection process.
- **Recommendations for change** focused primarily on three areas: reconsidering the target audience to include a more experienced population, diversifying the faculty and presenters to include a variety of professional backgrounds and experiences, and offering ongoing activities for alumni to allow them to continue to develop leadership skills and to network with other alumni.

Question 4.1 Key Informants' comments about SEPHLI and its benefits to public health

Stakeholder Views and Recommendations

Five stakeholders were interviewed for their perspectives about the long-term influences of SEPHLI on graduates' public health practice. Of the interviewees, four were graduates of the program and the other was affiliated with the program in a management role. Three were from West Virginia, one was from North Carolina and the other was from Virginia. A standard interview guide (Appendix B) was used to ask interviewees about:

- Their involvement with SEPHLI
- Their overall expectations and hopes for the program
- The benefits of SEPHLI for individual leaders and networks, and subsequent changes in programs, systems, organizations, and policies
- Concerns about SEPHLI
- Recommendations for change and alumni activities

General Views about the SEPHLI Program

Four of the five interviewees were graduates and are now in positions to recommend others to attend. Their dual perspective provides insight into their experiences as scholars and as those with first-hand knowledge of the impact of the program on the larger field. These respondents perform various roles, including reviewing applications, identifying future scholars, promoting the program, and acting as SEPHLI liaisons within their states. Several interviewees also participated in other leadership institutes run by the NCIPH, including the Management Academy for Public Health and the National Public Health Leadership Institute, giving them a broad perspective on leadership development.

Hopes and Expectations for SEPHLI

Overall, respondents hoped that SEPHLI participants would develop leadership skills and network with public health officials from other states and with faculty. Examples of desired skills and understandings that they hoped scholars would get included:

- increased ability to convey problems to legislatures and the general public
- increased ability to obtain funding
- a broader perspective on the leadership aspects of their job and on ways to influence public health
- enhanced understanding of how to employ their pre-existing leadership skills to accomplish goals
- greater exposure to other fields in public health.

The stakeholders hoped that the enhanced networks would mean establishing relationships, sharing information across states and professional groups, and help scholars recognize that all

public health leaders experience similar challenges. These relationships would hopefully lead to enhanced collaboration and idea-sharing, and provide mutual support in program development.

As one interviewee stated:

[My expectations] are two things. One is exposure to public health generally. We in our division are the liaison to local health departments and we're responsible for monitoring the funds that they use to provide their core public health services. So we get staff in here that may not necessarily have a lot of background in state and local governmental public health systems. The other is the networking, nationally and state to state.

Four of the interviewees were familiar with the program in its more recent years and felt comfortable answering the question of whether the program should continue. All four agreed that it should continue, expressing that there are not many opportunities for public health officials to receive leadership training. As one stated:

I'd like to see it grow. Building public health leadership for the future is not a waning issue, it's a waxing issue. It's the best think we can do as public health leaders to ensure that we continue to improve the health of the public is to build additional and stronger public health leadership. SEPHLI and programs like SEPHLI are absolutely vital to doing that.

Observed Benefits SEPHLI

Respondents also wrote about the benefits they have observed in themselves and in other graduates. These benefits fall into the categories of individual leader development, network development and activities, and program, systems, organization or policy level changes. On the personal level, stakeholders have observed graduates developing professionally through promotions, working together more effectively, broadening their understanding, and communicating more effectively, particularly with the legislature. Other skills observed included an enhanced understanding of systems thinking, risk communication, and facilitation, which in one case led to development of a surveillance and outbreak investigation program. One respondent cited that for them, it was a great opportunity to gain perspective:

I think public health as a profession in many settings is extraordinarily busy and people wear a lot of hats...I think one of the opportunities [SEPHLI] presents staff is the opportunity to step back and think about the leadership aspect of what they do as opposed to just getting the job done...the opportunity to step back and think bigger picture about what they are doing.

Respondents thought the self-assessment pieces were particularly helpful for both themselves and for others; graduates gain insight and encouragement from knowing more about who they are and how to continue developing, and from an increased understanding of their personality types and styles.

Benefits observed surrounding network development were not as numerous or concrete. Stakeholders acknowledged that having both state and local leaders attend SEPHLI improves relationships and that those collaborations may foster program, system, organization, and policy changes. The question of observable benefits was more challenging for stakeholders to answer, as many stakeholders acknowledged that they have not had the opportunity to talk with SEPHLI graduates about the program's benefits, or that they do not interact with them on a regular basis.

Concerns

When asked about any concerns they had about the program, respondents primarily expressed a fear that the program would not be able to continue. Possible reasons for discontinuation would include states' lack of participation or a lack of overall funding. All four respondents who addressed this question agreed that the program should not go away and wanted to know more about the return on the investment for each student and how to market that information to people in high-level state positions. One stated a concern that others will perceive SEPHLI as an elitist program due to the selection process.

Section 4.2 Key Informants' Recommendations for the SEPHLI program

Target Audience

Four of the interviewees provided recommendations on how to improve SEPHLI, focusing primarily on the target audience. Currently SEPHLI is promoted for mid- to senior- level public health officials. While all four respondents agreed this is the ideal population for this program, there was a wide variety of perspectives about the levels of experience that a participant should possess prior to participating. Training those new to the field allows them to dive head first into the heart of the issues, and increases the likelihood that they will stay in the field and that they will apply their training throughout their career. Scholars closer to retirement may not continue to use or transfer their skills. However, there is a need to reinvigorate people who have been in the field long enough to have acquired substantial experience, but may have another ten or fifteen years to serve. One respondent stressed the importance of attracting a more experienced group:

I would be looking for people who are either the head decision-makers, chief decision-makers, in their particular areas whether it's a local health department, local health district, public health office, or direct reports of those people that find themselves in that position. Not the ultimate but the penultimate. When you start getting further down you begin to dilute the experience for the people in the groups. It's beneficial for the people in the groups that don't have some of those experiences because there's some mentoring that goes on and they can benefit from the experience of their colleagues but there's not as much learning that can take place for the people at the more advanced level.

Faculty and Presenters

Additional recommendations for program improvement came from one participant who would like to see an increased level of experience among SEPHLI presenters and faculty. This interviewee recommended people with extensive practical leadership experience lead some of the sessions and that the program recruit presenters from varied positions and backgrounds.

[I would recommend] enriching the experience with some substantial non-public health content, business leader content, government leader content, public service, military-there's a rich tradition of leadership to pull from in different disciplines. I think it's important for public health people to get a sense of what people in public health leadership do and that's very important but I also think we need to know what other leadership styles and cultures exist and how they're the same and how they're different. Giving people a broader context.

Ongoing Activities for Scholars

When asked about ongoing activities would be most helpful to graduates to continue their development, respondents referred back to network development. Interviewees cited a need to

help graduates maintain contact with one another after graduation, such as through telephone conferences to discuss leadership ideas and publications, listservs, one day refresher courses, annual meetings and lecture series, alumni gatherings and an in-state network/club of graduates to promote ideas and approaches they learned in SEPHLI. Interviewees stated that development is an ongoing process, and that programs should provide graduates with the opportunity to participate again at a later stage in their career, as well as to provide a website with development tools available for self-study.