



Open Letter to Iowans

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Why You Should Care that it is National Public Health Week

April 5, 2021

My fellow Iowans,

Today marks the start of National Public Health Week. A week dedicated to honoring our public health workforce. This year's theme is "Building bridges to better health." The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us all how important those bridges truly are.

Before the pandemic, there was a good chance you were not familiar with the public health department in your area. That's understandable. When vaccination rates are high, when people have access to environments prioritizing physical activity, when children are screened for lead exposure, and when people aren't getting sick from going to pools and restaurants, it means your health department is quietly making sure you are protected from disease and disability. For years, local health departments mainly worked as coordinating agencies behind the scenes, only grabbing headlines during the infrequent disease outbreak. A career in public health is one of service to your community, but service that a community may never fully recognize or understand.

The last 12 months changed everything. Here in Iowa, people are now well-acquainted with their county and state health departments, the state public health laboratory in Iowa City, and the network of non-profit agencies that work with the government to help provide public health services to every corner of the state. While 2020 was hard on all of us, let us take a moment to recognize these people who have been pulled into the spotlight.

Before we do, we also want to recognize the doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists, and other health care workers, including the support staff who keep clinics and hospitals running. They have worked long hours, often at great personal risk, to save the lives of our parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and even our children. They have been honored in parades, had their stories featured across the media, and even been given free tickets to the Super Bowl. They deserve our gratitude and our respect.

But while clinical health care is focused on the individual patient, public health focuses on everyone. Public health workers are often the unsung heroes. Early in the pandemic, they faced a scared nation who wanted answers where science had not yet provided them. They faced criticism as federal and state recommendations changed every few weeks. Health departments took calls from concerned business owners struggling to keep their doors open, citizens who were confused by the barrage of information and misinformation, and elected officials (at all levels) concerned about the health and economic needs of the state. They worked to stay true to evidence-based guidelines even when local and state policy differed.

Leader[s] in Health Equity

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Public health workers endured late nights and long hours, built contact tracing programs with little resources or funding, turned over every rock to help find protective equipment for hospitals and clinics, recruited volunteers to help with the work when the money was running low, and lost sleep over every death due to COVID-19, and now delivering vaccines across Iowa.

I stand in awe of all that public health practitioners in Iowa have accomplished these past 12 months. April 5-9 is National Public Health week. I hope you will join me in recognizing the incredible and too often thankless effort that these professionals gave in the face of unprecedented adversity. They deserve our gratitude and our support not just this week, but always.

The pandemic is not over. Pockets of the disease remain, particularly when eligible adults remain unvaccinated and people choose not to wear masks, potentially contributing to spread the disease by not taking evidence-based precautions. After the pandemic subsides, Iowa will still face increasing obesity rates, an opioid epidemic, disparities in care among racial minorities, lack of rural health care providers, vaccine hesitancy, a long list of disease and health care access issues.

Public health has persevered without widespread public support, and with little additional financial support before the pandemic. They could really use your sustained support now, as well as your thanks.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J. Whitaker', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Jeremy Whitaker, EdD, MPH
IPHA Board President