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Service Learning in Public Health: Exploring the Benefit to Host Agencies in CDC's Public Health Associate Program

Corinne J. Wigington, MPH^a, Robyn K. Sobelson, PhD^b, Heather L. Duncan, MPH^c, and Andrea C. Young, PhD^d

^aHealth Scientist, Applied Systems Research and Evaluation Branch, Division of Public Health Performance Improvement, Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA

^bBehavioral Scientist, Applied Systems Research and Evaluation Branch, Division of Public Health Performance Improvement, Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA

^cDirector, Public Health Associate Program, Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA

^dBranch Chief, Applied Systems Research and Evaluation Branch, Division of Public Health Performance Improvement, Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA

Abstract

The “learn by doing” approach to training is common in the public health field and is a core component of service-learning programs. Trainee satisfaction, learning, and application of learning have been studied. What is less understood is the perspective the agencies that host trainees. This study aimed to identify whether and how the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Public Health Associate Program (PHAP) adds value to the agencies that host trainees during two-year field assignments. A qualitative exploratory study design consisting of 9 semi-structured telephone interviews with PHAP host agency supervisors was used. Results suggested that PHAP increased host agencies' capacity by assigning capable trainees to host agencies. Trainees made quality contributions that led to agency and/or community-wide improvements and positively affected the agencies' culture. Further evaluation of the host perspective is necessary, as coupled with the trainee's perspective, will provide a more holistic understanding of program value.

Keywords

program evaluation; service-learning; workforce development; public health

Correspondence: Corinne J. Wigington, Office for State, Tribal, Local and Territorial Support (OSTLTS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1825 Century Center - Office 4024, Atlanta, GA 30345, MS-E-70; Phone: 404.574.3497; cjwigington@cdc.gov.

Disclaimer:

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Ideal conditions for adult learning emphasize the need for active engagement in authentic tasks that are applicable to the learner's workplace, professional practice, or community.¹⁻⁵ This "learn by doing" approach to training, often referred to as "experiential learning,"¹⁻⁵ is common within the field of public health⁶⁻¹³ and is a core component of service-learning programs. Service-learning programs are unique in that they focus learning within the context of community service.¹⁴⁻¹⁵ By design, these programs seek to benefit both the trainee and the organization providing the service opportunity.¹⁴⁻¹⁶

Prior studies examining the effectiveness of training programs that incorporate service-learning opportunities have focused predominantly on trainees' experiences, aiming to understand whether trainees are satisfied with, learn from, and apply learned concepts.¹⁷⁻¹⁹ What has been studied less is the perspective of the other party—the organizations serving as hosts. Evidence suggests that there are benefits to host organizations,^{1,16-20} but more information is needed about the value of service-learning programs to hosts.

This paper describes the results of an exploratory, qualitative study conducted with organizations that host trainees in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Public Health Associate Program (PHAP). The study explored whether, and how, PHAP adds value to host agencies.

Program Overview

PHAP was initiated in 2007 in response to a marked decline in the number of field-based federal public health workers,²¹ a trend reflective of the overall decrease in the size of the public health workforce nationally.²²⁻²⁴ PHAP's mission is to provide service-learning opportunities to early career professionals in public health. Trainees (referred to as associates) are employed by CDC for two year assignments and placed in health agencies (referred to as host sites) nationwide. Associates support essential public health services²⁵ (e.g., assessment) across diverse topical areas (e.g., preparedness).²¹ Associates are paired with an agency staff-person who serves as their host site supervisor. That supervisor is responsible for daily oversight and for facilitating learning opportunities (e.g., access to local training, shadowing). Associates' service-learning assignments are a component of a broader curriculum.²⁶

Systemic evaluation began in 2014 and is ongoing. The evaluation's primary purposes are to assess the quality and effectiveness of PHAP, determine its value and impact, and inform program improvement. Initial evaluation activities focused on the associates, specifically describing the composition of cohorts, assessing associates' perspectives of trainings, and documenting the disposition of graduates and alumni.²⁷ Limited data have been collected on associates' perceptions of host sites, specifically if associates would recommend their host site to future associates. This study supplements previous activities and helps address the question, "How does PHAP add value to host sites?"

Method

This study reflects the first data collection from host sites. An exploratory, qualitative approach was purposefully used to gather insights into potential outcomes while laying a data-driven foundation for future, more robust evaluation efforts.

Participants

Framed by the success case method,²⁸ which values inquiry from those who have been successful in a program or learning opportunity, systematic, non-probabilistic sampling was used to identify a sample of high-performing host sites. Potential participants were considered if—

1. The agency was rated favorably by past associates on an evaluation survey (n=47);
2. The agency had served as a host site for three or more cohorts (n=29);
3. The supervisor had direct oversight for associates in more than one cohort (n=18); and
4. The agency was hosting an associate in calendar year 2015 (n=14).

Of 278 possible host sites, 14 met the inclusion criteria. Additional factors, such as geography and agency type (i.e., local vs. state health department) were considered. Nine supervisors were ultimately selected representing one federal quarantine station, two state health departments, and six local health departments; all 9 invited supervisors consented in writing prior to participation.

Procedure and Analysis

Nine telephone interviews were conducted in February 2016. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to guide discussion, consisting of 17 open-ended questions, the majority of which solicited feedback on associate contribution and value to the host site. The interviews lasted 30–60 minutes. Two evaluation team members served as interviewers; two team members documented the interviews by typing notes. After the interviews, notes were reviewed, cross-checked for consistency, and combined. Final notes were analyzed qualitatively.²⁹ Inductive codes were applied to comments by two raters. Raters discussed and validated codes; inter-rater agreement was achieved. Common themes were aggregated.

Results

Increasing Capabilities

Results indicated that associates contributed to host sites by performing activities that increased the host sites' capabilities. Each respondent described a specific associate who excelled, the most valuable activities, and the results of his/her contribution (see Figure 1). Examples of associates' activities included data collection, training development, and serving as the public health representative for community coalitions. Each associate's activities were unique to his/her host site, yet overall, were aligned with the provision of three essential public health services²⁵: 1) monitoring health, 2) mobilizing community

partnerships, and 3) developing policies. Associates' activities resulted in such contributions as the execution of trainings and improvements to health plans. Overall, associates' contributions led to improvements at the agency and community-levels.

Increasing Capacity

All respondents suggested that associates added value to host sites by increasing capacity by serving as additional, capable staff. One respondent stated, "Associates are a unique type of help. They are not 'temps,' but motivated people who are looking at public health as a career." When asked to describe the effects to their agencies if PHAP were to end, six respondents reported that work would not get done or would be postponed, three stated that existing staff would need to be reassigned, and two suggested that the community would be negatively impacted. One respondent, representing a local health department serving rural areas described, "People would see it as a big failure on public health's part if we weren't able to participate in coalitions. They have come to expect having someone to work alongside of them."

Influencing Culture

Respondents reported that associates positively influenced the host site culture. Four supervisors stated that associates infused fresh, new ideas into existing programs, and two reported that associates motivated and energized staff. In one respondent's words: "Associates brought life to veteran staff. The opportunity to be invested in a young, hungry associate has been encouraging for those who are getting stale." Additionally, six respondents described their enjoyment of mentoring and five the opportunity to support the next generation of the public health workforce. One respondent noted, "Many of us have served as interns and we want to pay it back."

Limitations

Because of its exploratory purpose and qualitative nature, the study intentionally included a small, purposeful sample. The results reflect the perceptions of those program participants who were deemed "successful" in accordance with established inclusion criteria. While this study generates new insight into service learning within the context of public health agencies, it represents the beginning of inquiry. The results are not intended for generalization.

Discussion

The study's inclusion criteria, guided by the success case method²⁸ was successful in isolating high-performing host sites from which to learn. Results suggest that associates added value performing needed activities that increased host sites' capabilities and capacity, while positively influencing culture. Often, associates were assigned to projects that would otherwise not have been completed due to lack of resources. Although associates' responsibilities varied, their activities most closely aligned to the essential public health service of mobilizing partnerships. This finding suggests that highly functioning associates can be forward-facing team members at state, local and federal health agencies.

Associates' activities contributed to improvements at the agency and community levels. In a few cases, contributions were deemed of high enough quality to serve as models for replication across the agency or community (e.g., one associate helped establish a community point-of-dispensing location that was later used as a state-wide model). Finally, associates' presence had ripple effects on host sites, motivating and energizing staff and influencing supervisors. Supervisors welcomed the opportunity to mentor associates and described a sense of responsibility to give back to the next generation.

Results identified examples of how a service-learning program can benefit host agencies. These results will inform a survey that will be routinely distributed to all host sites to identify whether this preliminary finding is supported and gather programmatic feedback.

Implications for Practice

The findings identify preliminary yet tangible and meaningful benefits of a service-learning program to high performing host organizations. These findings have practice and evaluation-based implications. For practice purposes, training program designers may be able to structure assignments to further enhance the likelihood that trainees will add value to host organizations. For evaluation purposes, additional inquiry is needed to understand whether these findings can be replicated and expanded. The host perspective is important, as this viewpoint, coupled with the trainee's, will provide a more holistic understanding of program value. Overall, organizations that have the opportunity to serve as hosts in service-learning programs should be encouraged by these preliminary findings. In the landscape of diminishing resources and staffing shortages, leveraging trainees in these programs is an alternative, creative way to filling voids.

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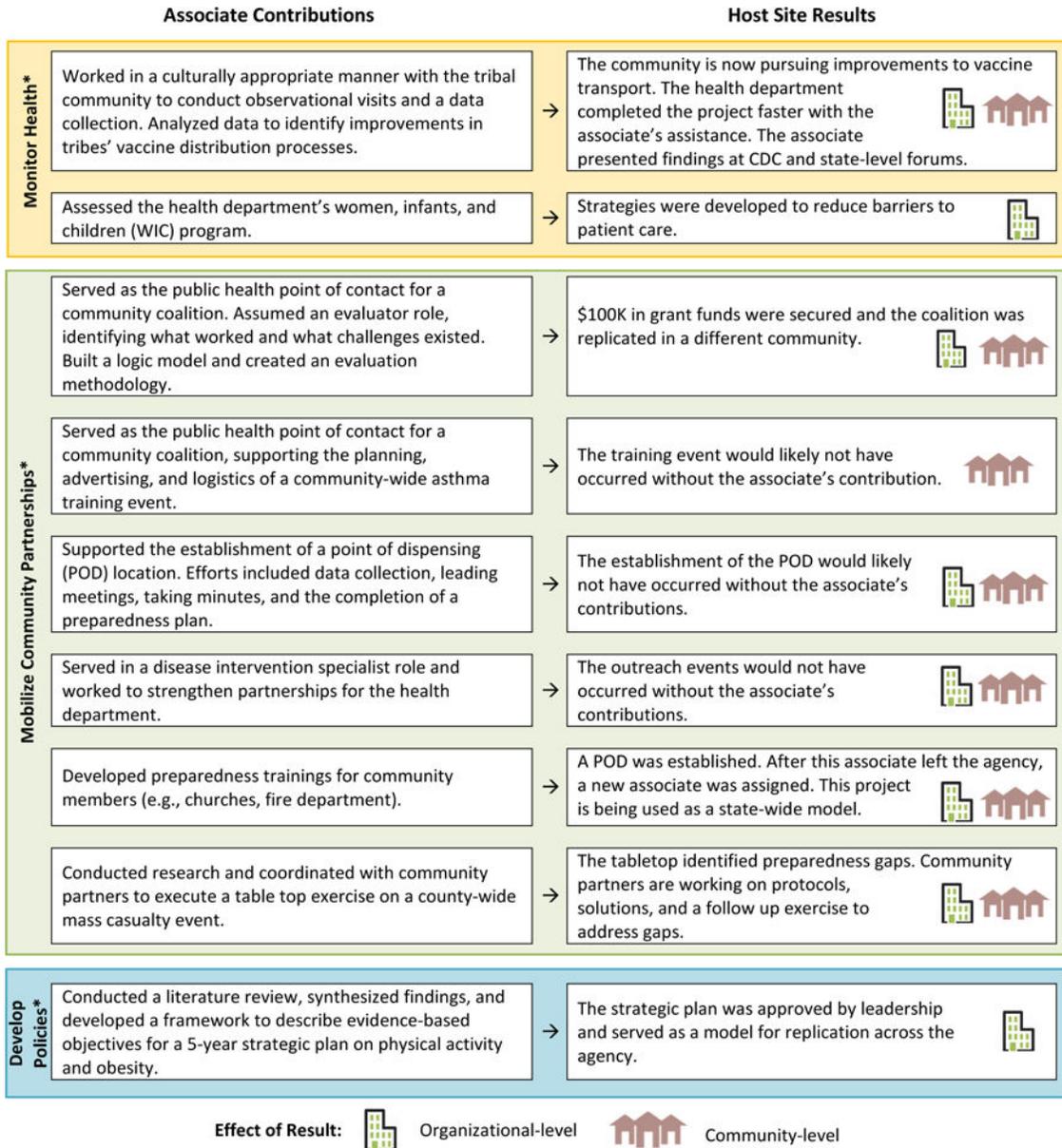
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Figure 1.
Associate Contributions and Host Site Results