

The Honorable Xavier Becerra  
Secretary  
Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS)  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dr. Rochelle Walensky  
Director  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)  
1600 Clifton Road  
Atlanta, GA 30329

John Howard, M.D.  
Director  
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Department of Health and Human Services  
395 E Street, S.W., Suite 9200  
Washington, D.C. 20201

December 10, 2021

Dear Secretary and Directors:

As you are certainly aware, our nation has recently experienced an increase in violence aimed at Public Health workers in health departments and other community-based settings. This phenomenon is being caused by stress related to the COVID pandemic, and differences in opinion regarding the best ways of addressing it.

We are joining other national and state organizations in calling on the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to establish a national reporting system for incidents of violence, harassment and threats against state and local public health professionals working to protect the public's health.

Throughout the pandemic, from death threats to protests, intimidation, release of personal information, and even shots fired at their homes, the state and local public health workforce has been the focus of attacks and harassment that have added to the already immense pressure they are experiencing as they do their jobs to prevent illness and death<sup>(1)</sup>

A random sampling of news stories in our state of North Carolina shows examples of harassment and even violence of the public health workforce (and even public-school staff and board members) from our smallest to our largest counties.

These acts negatively impact community health due to fears for worker safety, job dissatisfaction, and an exodus from the public workforce.

A 2021 study of the public health workforce by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found about 26% of respondents experienced stigma or discrimination because of work, 24% felt bullied, threatened, or harassed because of work, and 12% received job-related threats

because of work<sup>[1]</sup>. The New York Times in October 2021 reported an exodus of over 500 health department leaders over the prior 19 months<sup>[3]</sup>.

Such departures come at a time when a strong public health system is most needed to adequately respond to COVID-19 and when recruiting new leadership into the current hostile environment is most challenging. Thus, the nation is facing a public health leadership void during a pandemic, putting the nation's health in greater peril.

To adequately address this alarming problem, we ask the CDC and NIOSH to establish a reporting system for violence and harassment against the public health workforce, along with guidance on preventing these situations in the future.

Protecting our state and local public health workforce is fundamental to the health of our nation. We look forward to working with you on this critical effort.

Sincerely,

Association of North Carolina Boards of Health

Merle Green, MPH, MBA, Executive Director

Ben Tillett, PharmD, RPh, Board Chair

CC:

Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA  
U.S. Surgeon General  
Department of Health and Human Services  
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Admiral Rachel L. Levine, MD  
Assistant Secretary for Health (ASH)  
Department of Health and Human Services  
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<sup>[1]</sup> Weber L, Barry-Jester A, Smith, M. Underfunded and under threat: Public Health Officials Face Wave of Threats, Pressure Amid Coronavirus Response. The Associated Press. June 12, 2020 accessed at: <https://khn.org/news/public-health-officials-face-wave-of-threats-pressure-amid-coronavirus-response/>

<sup>[2]</sup> Bryant-Genevier J, Rao CY, Lopes-Cardozo B, et al. Symptoms of Depression, Anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Suicidal Ideation Among State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Public Health Workers During the COVID19 Pandemic — United States, March–April 2021. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2021;70:947–952. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7026e1>

<sup>[3]</sup> Baker M, Ivory D. *Why Public Health Faces a Crisis Across the U.S.* New York Times, Oct. 18th, 2021 accessed at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/us/coronavirus-public-health.html>