



Reasons for Transforming Public Health in Missouri: A 3-Year Follow-Up Study

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Overview

This research project was instigated by the need to determine how public health professionals in Missouri view the current state of the public health system in Missouri, the needs in the field, and directions for future work. A survey of local public health agency directors and administrators was conducted, and their responses compared to a similar study conducted in 2018. The findings, both quantitative and qualitative, are presented and described.

Background

The #HealthierMO initiative hosted an initial convening on Thursday, March 1, 2018 in Columbia, MO. At this convening, public health professionals and stakeholders from communities across Missouri were polled for their opinions about Missouri's public health system, the need for transformation within the system, and their support for such a transformation effort. As part of this data collection, public health professionals were asked to identify the top 3 reasons for transforming Missouri's public health system; 85 participants responded.

The current survey was conducted to compare Missouri's local public health agencies' (LPHAs) top reasons for public health system transformation to those they identified pre-COVID pandemic, in 2018. #HealthierMO intends to use this data to better understand how our work can more effectively address the most pressing needs of Missouri's LPHAs and the overall public health system.

Survey Methodology

The survey was opened on February 18, 2021 using the online SurveyMonkey software. The survey consisted of three questions, one quantitative and two qualitative. The complete text

of the survey is contained in Appendix A. We emailed 115 total invitations, 42 were opened (36.5%), 32 recipients clicked through (27.8%), and we received 29 complete responses; the typical time spent was 3m:57s.

The survey was closed on February 19, 2021 at the end of the workday (approximately 6:00 PM CST). Data were downloaded as a SPSS data file and the IBM SPSS Statics 27 program was used to analyze all data.

Timeline. The survey was conceived and implemented within a very tight timeframe. The initial idea was presented on a Wednesday morning. The survey was developed that afternoon, deployed on Thursday morning, data were collected until Friday at close of business. Data were analyzed Friday evening and distributed to the staff in draft form. By Monday morning, all analysis had been completed and a draft report was ready for proof reading by Monday night. The entire project took less one week to complete; a testament to the project team's responsiveness to an ever-changing public health environment.

Quantitative Findings

The first item asked respondents to choose their top three reasons why the Missouri public health system should be transformed. This item offered respondents the same 12 options that were presented in the original 2018 survey. The responses clarify the benefits that public health professional expect to receive from the public health system transformation process. All 29 participants responded to this question.

Stable and increased funding remained the top reason for transforming the public health system, and the second-place reason in 2018, having a *unified voice focused on priority issues*, slipped to number 3. The largest drop was that transformation would cause public health to be *prioritized by elected officials (county and state)*, which dropped dramatically from #5 to #11,

and the largest increase was for *providing local governance authority* clarity, rising five spots from #11 to #6.

Post-COVID, LPHAs have minimal expectation that elected officials will prioritize public health, but LPHAs have a renewed interest in clarifying the role of public health in Missouri. Funding remains a top priority, along with consistency of public health operations, and the public health system speaking with a unified voice. The results are displayed in Table 1 and in Figure 1.

Table 1

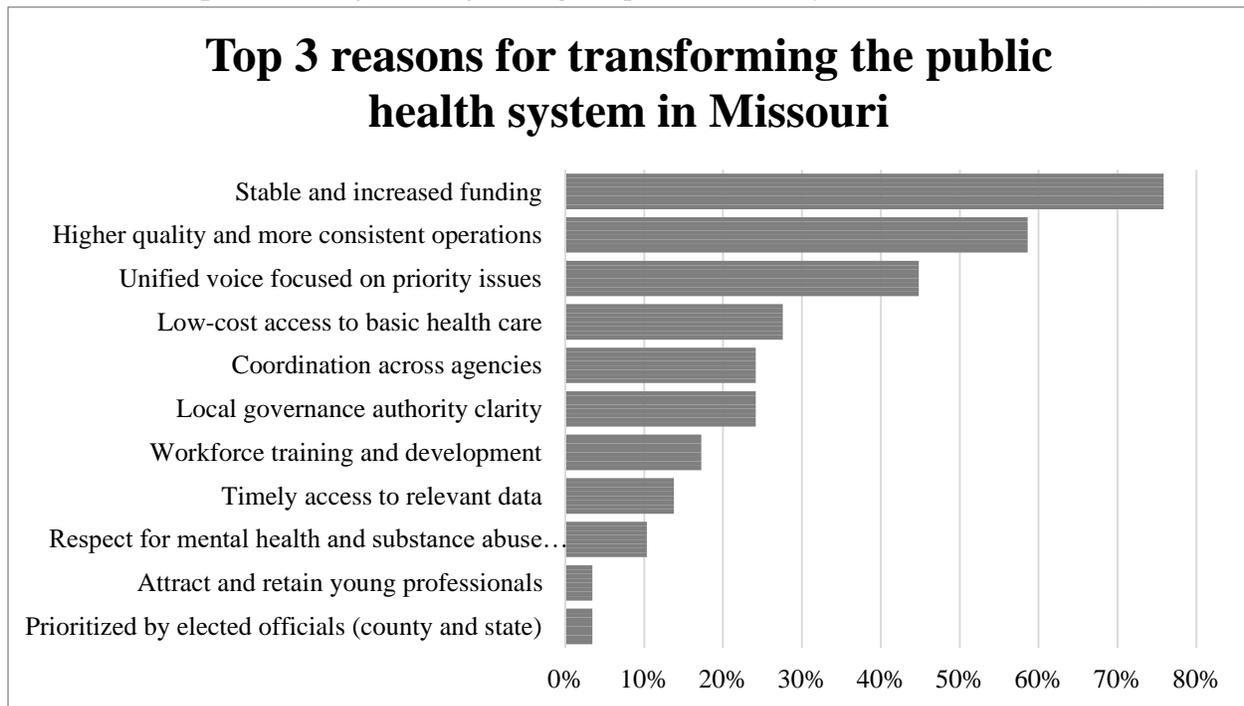
*What are the **top 3** reasons for transforming the public health system in Missouri?*

Reason	Percentages		Ranking		Change
	2018	2021	2018	2021	
Stable and increased funding	76%	75.9%	1	1	0
Higher quality and more consistent operations	32%	58.6%	4	2	2
Unified voice focused on priority issues	51%	44.8%	2	3	-1
Low-cost access to basic health care	15%	27.6%	7	4	3
Coordination across agencies	34%	24.1%	3	5	-2
Local governance authority clarity	6%	24.1%	11	6	5
Workforce training and development	24%	17.2%	6	7	-1
Timely access to relevant data	12%	13.8%	8	8	0
Respect for mental health and substance abuse support	8%	10.3%	10	9	1
Attract and retain young professionals	11%	3.4%	9	10	-1
Prioritized by elected officials (county and state)	27%	3.4%	5	11	-6
Leadership succession planning	1%	0%	12	12	0

Note. 85 respondents in the 2018 convening; 29 respondents to the 2021 follow-up survey.

Figure 1

What are the top 3 reasons for transforming the public health system in Missouri (ranked)?



Note. These data are from the 2021 survey.

Qualitative Findings

Researcher Biases

This survey used both a qualitative (numeric) methodology and a quantitative (open-ended response) methodology. In qualitative research, the evaluator seeks to step back from the analysis and allow the numbers to reveal the truth about the findings. The table and graph show the actual responses of the respondents, regardless of what the evaluator may think or feel about the topic. In quantitative research, however, the evaluator reads the open-ended responses and categorizes them based on their similarities and differences. This, of course, places the evaluator at the center of interpreting the findings, allowing for the expression of evaluators' preconceptions and biases.

Although in quantitative research, bias is to be avoided as much as possible in order to let the numbers "speak", in quantitative research the evaluator bias is "a feature not a bug."

Evaluators clearly state their biases going into the research so that the reader may understand quantitative findings in light of clearly stated researcher expectations.

The #HealthierMO initiative was developed to support and improve Missouri's public health system through a grassroots approach; thus, #HealthierMO staff have a bias of positivity in support of public health and local public health agencies. The #HealthierMO team has already worked to address the reasons for transformation identified by public health stakeholders in the original 2018 survey. All of the work conducted by the #HealthierMO team to address these issues, was informed by Missouri's Foundational Public Health Services model, which we were instrumental in developing and which was adopted in 2020. We are strongly pro-public health, have professional public health backgrounds, have worked at transforming Missouri's public health system, and want #HealthierMO to be instrumental in future transformation efforts.

Other Reasons for Transformation

The second item asked public health professionals for other reasons why the public health system should be transformed. Participants were asked to list as many as three options. This item was answered by 21 respondents, 8 skipped; the first option was answered by 100% of respondents, the second by 57.14%, and 52.38% answered all three options.

The responses were categorized based on similarity of responses. The most commonly suggested reason for transformation was to increase the organization, consistency, and continuity of public health services. The responses tied at #2 concerned stable funding and improving public perceptions of public health. The categories identified for this item are in Table 2.

Table 2

What other reasons for public health system transformation (not listed above) do you feel should also be prioritized?

Response Categories	Responses	Rank
Better organization/consistency/continuity	9	1
Improved ability/capacity to do certain things due to increased or stable funding	8	2
Demonstration of outcomes/generate community respect or understanding of public health	8	2
Stronger voice for public health/legislative issues	6	4
Addressing effects of COVID-19	3	
Workforce/recruitment/retention	3	
Better leadership	1	
Building local collaborations	1	
Regionalization	1	
Accreditation	1	

Post-COVID-19 Challenges

The third of the three items asked participants about the top challenges experienced by Missouri's public health system since the emergence of COVID-19. Participants were offered a single, open-ended response to which they may reply in whatever way was best for them. In total, 28 participants answered this item and 1 skipped.

As with the second item, the responses to this third item were categorized based on the similarity of the responses. The top consequence to public health resulting from responding to the COVID-19 pandemic related to funding, specifically the diversion of funds toward COVID-19 response and away from other areas and the lack of additional funding from the CARES ACT which was intended to help local public health agencies address COVID-19. The responses tied at number 2 concerned staffing and lack of leadership, organization, and communication from the state level government to the local public health agencies. The categories identified for this item are in Table 3.

Table 3

Since the emergence of COVID-19, what have been the top challenges experienced by Missouri's public health system?

Response Categories	Responses	Rank
Funding	12	1
Staffing	10	2
Lack of leadership/organization/communication	10	2
Politicization of public health	5	4
Lack of community support	3	
Vaccine allocation	3	
Lack of preparation for major event	3	
Rural issues/accessibility	2	
Public health policies/authority/enforcement	2	
LPHAs not being heard/listened to	2	
Competition for resources	2	
Access to care	1	

Appendix A

Text of the Reasons for Transformation Survey 2021

We are conducting a survey of Missouri’s public health professionals about the state of Missouri’s public health system. We would like to ask you three questions.

This survey should take less than 5 minutes to complete.

- Because this survey is time sensitive, please respond by the close of business Friday, February 19.
- We intend to analyze this data and email you the results within a week of the survey closing.
- Survey results will be de-identified and aggregated. Your name and participation will not be disclosed.

Please take a few minutes to respond to these questions.

1. What are the **top 3** reasons for transforming the public health system in Missouri?

Stable and increased funding

Timely access to relevant data

Workforce training and development

Attract and retain young professionals

Leadership succession planning

Unified voice focused on priority issues

Higher quality and more consistent operations

Coordination across agencies

Prioritized by elected officials (county and state)

Low-cost access to basic health care

Respect for mental health and substance abuse support

Local governance authority clarity

2. What other reasons for public health system transformation (not listed above) do you feel should also be prioritized?

<3 text boxes>

3. Since the emergence of COVID-19, what have been the top challenges experienced by Missouri’s public health system?

<text box>

Thank you for your time completing this survey. We will analyze this data and email you the results next week.