

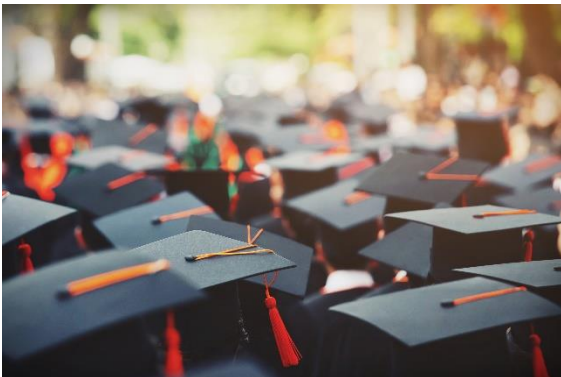
# Training disease detectives to support local public health in Massachusetts



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CATEGORY: **Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC)**

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health started a summer internship program in 2004 for local health departments to introduce students to applied public health work and gain experience, all while supporting local health departments to accomplish their goals. It has resulted in numerous students being hired and has expanded learning opportunities for students and health department staff.



## The “What”

Every profession, including public health has the daunting task of preparing the next generation to step into the shoes of those who are leaving. How do we properly prepare those coming behind us to continue our work, not only with the skill that is required but with the passion and dedication that is essential to the role? We call ourselves "disease detectives" because that is what we do, not for one person at a time but the entire community. Our challenge is convincing students to protect the world from disease through public health practice.

Massachusetts is blessed with many colleges and universities that offer a Master's degree in public health. While these programs are robust and provide a good academic experience, it is difficult to provide the real-world experience that can motivate students and show them how important and life-changing this career choice can be. To address this, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) offers a summer internship program in local health departments (LHDs).

Massachusetts has 351 cities/towns, each a jurisdiction with its own LHD. While each jurisdiction must respond to public health incidents and emergencies, resources vary widely from town to town. Projects are solicited from LHDs and then advertised to public health students at those colleges and universities with public health programs. MDPH then matches students to LHDs based on interest, location, resource need, etc. The summer begins with an orientation and ends with closing ceremonies where students showcase their



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work by poster or presentation at a day-long event. Toward the end of the summer, students are required to submit an abstract about their project and experience. Based on that abstract, students are chosen to give an oral or poster presentation.

In addition to the local public health work, MDPH cross-cutting epidemiologists, funded through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for the Prevention and Control of Emerging Infectious Diseases (ELC) cooperative agreement offer shadowing and mentoring opportunities and training on abstract writing and presenting. Giving students first-hand experiences while they are still in the process of making career choices is essential in attracting them to public health.

At the conclusion of the program, students, LHD staff, and school staff who are involved in the program are

asked to evaluate their experiences. Cross-cutting epidemiologists oversee all aspects of the program including soliciting LHDs for projects, drawing in students, matching students to projects, providing shadowing and mentoring opportunities, planning opening and closing ceremonies, all with the excitement and passion they feel for their chosen profession.

### The “So What”

This Internship Program has proved its value to MDPH and to other health departments throughout the country. As we usher these students through their internship program, we get to know them well. We see the excitement in some, the dedication and seriousness in others. We also sometimes see the lack of interest or motivation in a few, which is fine as this life is not for everyone. We then hire the ones who can and will perform well. We look at this program as an extended job interview and try to impress upon them how true that is. We have hired interns from this program to continue on to fill the role of flexible and prepared epidemiologist funded in the ELC foodborne section, COVID work, antibiotic resistance follow-up, and to help investigate children who might have acute flaccid myelitis. We have also hired them as permanent employees to be part of our team of "Disease Detectives."

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### The “Now What”

MDPH has been hosting interns since 2004 and hopes to continue to do it well into the future. But it takes resources. We have been able to use ELC funds to offer stipends to these students for most of the years, but not all. Our on-going needs include the ability to use our cross-cutting ELC epidemiologists to help manage this program and to provide funding for student stipend support. The lessons learned from facilitating the internship program have been adopted in other departments to launch similar programs and even expand the scope to include undergraduate public health students.

Key contributors to this project include Julie Coco, Training and Internship Coordinator, Division of Epidemiology, Massachusetts Department of Public Health.