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David Remmert Touts the Importance of Educating the Next Wave of Health Care Workers

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WGLT Interview with David Remmert on August 25, 2023

Announcer: Public departments were front and center during the Covid 19 pandemic and so were the issues that those agencies had been facing for years. Long before Covid hit, limited funding and an aging work force challenged the public health workforce. With light newly shed on these issues some programs and efforts to rebuild public health are unfolding across the country. Let's take a look at money coming to the Mclean County Health Department and a new program at Illinois Wesleyan University. Here's WGLT's Eric Stock.

Eric Stock: David Remmert had a word for his decade's long career in public health.

David Remmert: Thirty-one years, I would say is an anomaly.

Stock: Now a professor at Illinois Wesleyan University School of Nursing and Health Sciences, Remmert spent two seventeen-year stints with both the Champaign/Urbana Health Department and the Dewitt/Piatt Bi-County Health Department.

Remmert: It was different every day. There were new challenges to confront and problem solving. You know they had to be done on the basis of any given issue, and I liked that.

Stock: But even when Remmert was starting his career, he says public health faced a career longevity issue.

Remmert: When I did my master's thesis, the average years of experience of public health professionals was five.

Stock: Decades later the problem has only gotten worse. A new study published this year in the Annual Review of Public Health documented a steep drop off in public health workers during the 2008 recession. Then an additional 40,000 jobs lost between 2010 and 2013 and no real recovery by the time the Covid 19 pandemic hit when public health workers were on the frontline. David Remmert says he saw an increase in more than fifty people on staff at the Champaign/Urbana Public Health District in the early 2000's. Many of those positions were related to grants, he says, which meant they weren't guaranteed permanence.

Remmert: That health department really has not grown since I left, it's been about twenty years ago now so you kind of saw a period across health departments overall where there is a great period of growth and now it has stagnated.

Stock: Grant funding that allowed for that early 2000 surge in public health employment has dwindled too. Jessica McKnight has been at the helm of the Mclean County health department since 2019. Before that she was a health department director in Missouri.

Jessica McKnight: The public health funding has been a challenge in something that in the last several years, prior to Covid, we were seeing some money pulled back in or reduced.

Stock: Given her experience in two states, McKnight says the challenges right now are...

McKnight: Definitely is not something that's unique to public health or Mclean County Health department.

Stock: Retired health care worker, David Remmert, says addressing public health's challenges are especially crucial following the Covid pandemic.

Remmert: Imagine an infection like Covid, that is that communicable, but twice as deadly and how are we going to be prepared to deal with the next one. In light of the fact that we have 40% fewer people working in public health now.

Stock: And there do appear to be some efforts aimed at bolstering the public health workforce. The Federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, for example, awarded funding to state governments to be doled out to smaller health departments. Here this grant is called the Strengthening Illinois Public Health Administration. Administrator Jessica McKnight says the Mclean County Health Department is anticipating a grant of nearly \$300,000.

McKnight: Looking at some maybe creative options that we did not have the opportunity to do before but are taking advantage of this grant to look at incentives for recruitment and retention.

Stock: McKnight says the public health agency has submitted its plan for the money to the Illinois Department of Public Health for review and is awaiting approval. McKnight says the health department also hopes to use the money to improve its outreach in rural areas. On the McLean County Health department services are available to all county residents, its physical location is in downtown Bloomington. Meaning some people who live farther away may have difficulty accessing it.

McKnight: We've been looking ahead at taking some of our public health services mobile, specifically out into Bloomington/Normal and across our rural communities. Being the largest county in Illinois land, area wide, it is definitely something we're wanting to focus on.

Stock: Illinois Wesleyan University is also hoping to bolster the public health workforce through a new degree program in the School of Nursing and Health Sciences. David Remmert retired from the Dewitt/Piatt Health Department last year and is now an assistant professor within the program at Wesleyan.

Remmert: A lot of these high schoolers who spent part of their high school career in insolation, you know now they kind of have a pretty good idea of what public health is all about, and so creating this new major falls at a very good, opportune time.

Stock: Remmert says the process to create the new interdisciplinary major wasn't finalized until February, meaning it's first cohort which has already kicked off this semester is small, about five students.

Remmert: You know over time, I think that the numbers of students that cohorts each year do nothing but increase, and you know that's following a national trend now too, so it's exciting.

Stock: David Remmert and Jessica McKnight acknowledge while funding and resources have challenged public health departments, the stresses brought upon workers during Covid 19 were unprecedented and hopefully relegated to the pandemic's early days. Here's Jessica McKnight from the Mclean County Health Department.

McKnight: Public health has, you know, specifically seen a challenge likely due to the Covid 19 pandemic and pandemic response.

Stock: And here's David Remmert on his pandemic era days as head of the Dewitt/Piatt Bi-County Health Department. He says not a day went by that he didn't get cussed out.

Remmert: People wanting my head for various reasons and it was on both sides of an issue. "Close the restaurants, you can't close," [laughing] and you know the other side was, "You've got to close the restaurants," and it was on both sides of the issue.

Stock: Both Remmert and Jessica McKnight find the work of public health fulfilling despite a tumultuous few years. Public health departments are tasked with disease control which is why they provide immunizations, treatment, testing and tracing for sexually transmitted infections and why they inspect restaurants for cleanliness and health standards. They're also supposed to catch people who may fall through the cracks, serving people who can't find a dentist who will take Medicaid for instance or providing disease testing for free for the uninsured. Administrator, Jessica McKnight says she thinks that kind of work can be rewarding. Something in the Mclean County Health Department will be reflected in the new recruitment efforts.

McKnight: Jobs in public health offer benefits like a pension, holidays/weekends off, and work/life balance and again overall job satisfaction, connection to your community, and being able to see/feel the direct impact of your work.

Stock: And while he'd like to see more funding and more resources allocated to the mission of public health, Illinois Wesleyan's David Remmert says he's heartened by post Covid recognition of the work public health departments do and hopes it will draw more people to the profession.

Remmert: It's a great field, you know, and it is an opportunity to do so much good, and I think that is the motivator behind why people go into those fields.

Stock: Remmert says now is a great time to find a career in public health. With reporting from Lindsey Jones, I'm Eric Stock.