

Reframed Answers to Tough Questions about Public Health

The questions below were collected directly from the public health community as part of the PHRASES initiative. Each reframed answer offers a more effective way to present this information, based on FrameWorks' evidence-based recommendations.



What is Public Health?

Standard Answer

Public health is what we do together as a society to ensure the conditions in which everyone can be healthy. It is about protecting and promoting the health of communities. Public health professionals focus on preventing, detecting, and responding to infectious disease outbreaks, educating about healthy behaviors, and advocating for programs and policies that support these behaviors. We also work to improve health and well-being by addressing the social determinants of health. We know that people who live in clean, safe, and supportive environments with access to the most basic needs have a better chance of leading healthy lives.



Tip: The *Foundation of Community Health* metaphor deepens understanding about the social determinants of health—a topic at the center of public health but about which other sectors have limited familiarity or knowledge.

Reframed Answer

Public health is what we build together as a society when we shape our communities so that everyone has what they need for optimal health. The health of our community is like a building—it depends on a strong and stable foundation. Things like quality education, safe and affordable housing, safe drinking water, and access to healthy foods and safe parks lead to positive outcomes for health and well-being for everyone in important ways. A solid foundation will support long-lasting good health for everyone.



How is public health different from health care?

Standard Answer

Public health centers on the health of a community or group of people, whereas health care is centered on individuals. Health care focuses on preventive medicine and treating people with diseases or illnesses, while public health focuses on the underlying social and economic factors that affect the health of everyone in the community. Access to quality and affordable health care services is essential for good health, but it is not sufficient alone. Public health professionals focus on addressing the very conditions in our communities that contribute to making us sick or that can promote health and wellness.

One powerful statistic highlights why health care alone is not sufficient to foster health: The United States spends almost twice as much on health care as other developed nations, yet it has lower life expectancy rates at birth and higher rates of infant mortality.



Tip: International comparisons are often counterproductive because Americans tend to rationalize them away. It's more effective to either avoid statistics or include a more comprehensive and causal explanation of why differences exist.

Reframed Answer

Public health centers on the health of a community or group of people, whereas health care is centered on individuals. Health care makes up one piece of a strong foundation of health by treating patient-centered illness and disease. Other pieces function by securing the conditions in our communities that promote health and wellness. Ensuring that these conditions are as solid, safe, and stable as possible is the priority of public health professionals. For example, the field works with other sectors to improve the underlying social and economic factors that affect the health of everyone in the community.

What does the health department actually do?

Standard Answer

Public health wears many different hats, but traditionally the health department has been responsible for protecting the public's health by using data to track and quickly respond to outbreaks of infectious diseases, strengthening immunization systems, ensuring food and water safety, promoting policies and wellness and education programs to encourage healthy behaviors, and more. Today, we still do all that, but the health department's role has expanded to focus on preventing the root causes of chronic diseases, such as diabetes, asthma, and heart disease.



Tip: Expand people's limited, and often dated, notions about what the field of public health does by clearly articulating that the field is transforming to meet modern-day challenges and current needs.

Reframed Answer

Public health departments are changing to meet the needs of the 21st century. Building on the field's many decades of experience, health departments protect the public's health by using data to track, quickly respond to, and prevent outbreaks of infectious diseases, ensure food and water safety, strengthen immunization systems and policies, and promote wellness. We are also expanding our role to address the root causes of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, asthma, and heart disease. Health departments are now looking to use their unique assets, skills, and competencies to form partnerships with other sectors to reduce the incidence and high costs associated with these preventable chronic diseases.



Why should public health professionals dictate how people live their lives?

Standard Answer

We recognize there is a balancing act between public health's duty to protect the public's health and the autonomy that Americans value. But some health decisions individuals make can have broader health consequences that affect others, such as health risks associated with secondhand smoke. We also increasingly have the data to document how the social determinants of health contribute to the high incidence and costs to society of certain diseases, so we often take a leadership role in promoting strategies to reduce these negative health impacts and costs.

Reframed Answer

Public health professionals promote a range of strategies that support wellness and well-being, and also reduce negative health impacts and costs. Data consistently show that environmental, behavioral, and other factors contribute to the high incidence and costs to society of certain diseases—and that information points to multiple actions we can take together to save money and drive large-scale improvements in health. Also, many health issues have broad community-wide consequences beyond how they affect particular individuals and families, such as exposure to secondhand smoke. Capitalizing on the insights and expert analysis of public health data allows us to manage our shared resources more efficiently when making short- and long-term decisions that affect our country's overall health.



Tip: Referencing the perception that public health initiatives pose a threat to individual autonomy risks reinforcing this unproductive association. Instead, make the affirmative case for how public health initiatives improve all people's lives.

What does housing have to do with public health?

Standard Answer

Housing is a significant contributor to a person's health and wellness. Many housing-related conditions can have a damaging impact on health. Public health recognizes that many of the health challenges experienced in a community are driven by the conditions in which people live, and the quality and safety of their housing is a key determinant of health status.

Reframed Answer

Safe, affordable housing is part of the foundation for a healthy community. Housing-related problems including overcrowding, utility shutoffs, and the presence of pests, mold, or lead paint can damage our health. Working together, housing and public health professionals can help an entire community reach its optimal health, and also address the living conditions that make people sick rather than continually treating the symptoms of poor health in the local hospital emergency room.



Tip: Whenever possible, remind people that we can work together to generate positive health outcomes across the community, in addition to reducing health risks and eliminating harms.



How can public health be a help, rather than a burden, when it comes to helping schools meet education mandates?

Standard Answer

There is clear evidence that healthy students are more likely to attend school and better able to focus in class. Public health and educators have always known that this leads to better outcomes for students in terms of test scores and high school completion, which in turn is linked to better health outcomes for young adults and beyond. Today, state and federal mandates are holding schools accountable to standards of classroom achievement and absenteeism, and public health can work with schools to better understand and address the community factors that may be driving high rates of absenteeism and poor academic performance.



Tip: Demonstrate how public health plays a supportive rather than leading role—one that values and enhances the ongoing work of other sectors without imposing new standards or taking over other professionals' roles.

Reframed Answer

Nobody knows better than teachers and principals that classrooms are more productive and lessons are more successful when students are healthy. Education professionals are already working overtime to improve test scores and increase attendance and graduation rates in line with state and federal mandates. Public health professionals can support educators by working together to identify, understand, and improve the community factors that limit students' ability to learn.

What does public health have to do with keeping my employees healthy?

Standard Answer

The health of employees (and their families) is significantly affected by the conditions in the communities in which they live. Safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, recreation facilities, a safe water supply, and other factors all contribute to keeping employees and their families healthy, or pose health risks that lead to high rates of sick leave and absences to take care of a sick family member. Public health focuses on the health of the community and works closely with other partners to help create the conditions outside the workplace in which everyone, including employees, can be healthy. Further, building healthier communities helps companies remain economically competitive by supporting the recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce.



Tip: Demonstrate familiarity with the sectors that you wish to engage, particularly when reaching out to the business community. Highlighting specific sub-sector initiatives is an effective strategy.

Reframed Answer

Public health professionals create safe environments and healthy conditions for all members of a community—including workers and their families. We recognize that supportive conditions like walkable neighborhoods, affordable housing, recreation facilities, and a safe water supply all keep employees healthy—which cuts down on absences due to sickness or caretaking and reduces rates of personal or medical leave. Further, building healthier communities helps companies remain economically competitive by supporting the recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce.



That idea sounds good... but does public health have any money to pay for it?

Standard Answer

Public health, just like other sectors and industries, faces significant funding challenges and is actively advocating for critically needed funding and resources. Additionally, we are exploring ways to partner with other sectors to share resources and to work together to apply for public and private funding to help each other meet shared goals.

Reframed Answer

Public health, just like other sectors and industries, works to manage resources carefully when making short- and long-term decisions. Reducing the costs associated with poor health and maximizing the protective factors that save money, not to mention time and energy, are top priorities for the field. Even in the face of funding challenges, we continue to explore ways to work together to secure public and private funding that will streamline our collective efforts to meet common goals.



Tip: Beginning communications with the scope of the problem can trigger crisis thinking, especially in the context of public sector funding. Instead, start with an aspirational vision by appealing to Value of Investment, which emphasizes widely shared commitments to cost reduction and efficiency.

How do we know that public health works?

Standard Answer

Public health views evidence as the foundation of informed decision-making. We measure who we are reaching and what works, and we have a long history of success. For example, public health has played a significant role in controlling and preventing infectious diseases, regulating tobacco use, enhancing motor vehicle safety, preventing childhood lead poisoning, and improving preparedness to natural and human-made disasters. When public health is performing as it should, the field is often invisible—it's hard to count lives saved or injuries averted when children are vaccinated, the water and food supply is safe, and traffic accidents are avoided. But the United States has made significant progress in the last century to improve the health and longevity of its population, and much of that is due to public health achievements.



Tip: Use the metaphor of GPS Navigation to explain how public health's data expertise can help other sectors move toward innovative solutions.

Reframed Answer

Public health professionals view data as the key to informed decision-making, much as drivers use GPS to navigate complex terrain. GPS quickly and accurately maps out multiple routes, citing each one's pros and cons. We constantly assess which populations we're reaching and measure what works.

We use our data expertise to drive positive health outcomes and move needed solutions forward. For example, public health has played a significant role in controlling and preventing infectious diseases, regulating tobacco use, enhancing motor vehicle safety, preventing childhood lead poisoning, improving natural disaster preparedness, and responding to many other health-related challenges. All of these successes demonstrate the value and effectiveness of the public health field.