

Envisioning a 21st Century Public Health Approach to Abortion: A Convening of Maternal and Child Health Professionals

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | December 2020

Research indicates that most state health departments and some local health departments engage in activities related to abortion.^{[1][2]} Most of these activities reflect what is required by law rather than the breadth of core public health activities. There is evidence, though, that some health departments — in diverse political settings — are able to bring public health approaches to their work related to abortion.^[2]

In 2017, a group of public health scientists published a *21st Century Public Health Approach to Abortion*.^[3] This vision asked public health professionals to (re)consider how health departments should address abortion. Specifically, it applied the established 10 Essential Public Health Services framework to propose how health departments would engage with abortion if they treated abortion like other public health topics.

Envisioning a 21st Century Public Health Approach to Abortion: A Convening of Maternal and Child Health Professionals (The 21st Century Convening) sought to engage public health practitioners in health departments in defining activities related to abortion that are appropriate for health departments and develop a plan for supporting health departments to use accepted public health frameworks and values to guide their work related to abortion.

The 21st Century Convening had three objectives:

- 1 Create shared understanding about reasons why abortion fits in the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) mission
- 2 Seek alignment around a vision for what activities related to abortion are appropriate for health departments
- 3 Define the major areas of work needed to translate this vision into action over the short and longer term.

A team at Advancing New Standards in Reproductive Health at the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF/ANSIRH) planned and organized the two-day convening with the support of two facilitators and an advisory committee comprised of representatives from state and local health departments and partner organizations. Thirty-six individuals from all regions of the U.S. attended the convening, representing 7 state and 9 local health departments and 10 partner organizations.

Convening participants named several core public health values and principles that should guide how health departments engage in work related to abortion. The most common were:

- **equity/health equity;**
- **commitment to scientific evidence;**
- **public health ethics, including autonomy and racial, gender, and social justice;**
- **public health values related to health care, including ensuring access to care, viewing abortion as part of comprehensive health care, and patient-centered care.**

Participants came to consensus about a set of activities related to abortion that are appropriate for health departments to engage in. The final set of activities is categorized by the 10 Essential Public Health Services and is included below. This list is meant to serve as a **menu of activities related to abortion that are appropriate for health departments**; it should **not** be considered a set of guidelines.

Participants identified four action steps for translating the menu of activities into practice:

- **Obtain endorsements of the menu of activities from leading public health organizations:** Individual health departments can begin using the menu of activities related to abortion to inform their work related to abortion. Obtaining endorsements of the menu of activities from leading public health organizations, such as the American Public Health Association, would provide national support to shift practices at many more state and local health departments.
- **Conduct MCH workforce development related to abortion:** Workforce development is necessary to support translation of these activities related to abortion into policy and programs. This workforce development should include trainings about research evidence related to abortion and public health professional responsibilities related to abortion for the current workforce and education on these topics for the future workforce; learning communities to support cohorts of department leaders in translating this work into practice; and resources and toolkits that provide evidence and information. In addition, people in other areas of the health department (e.g. health equity) may also benefit from this training.
- **Centralize collection and synthesis of research evidence and develop tools to support data collection:** Participants emphasized the importance of basing activities related to abortion in the best available research evidence, elevating existing scientific evidence related to abortion, and collecting jurisdiction-specific data on accessibility of abortion. To support these efforts, centralizing the collection and synthesis of research evidence about abortion and getting this information into formats that are easy to use by health department staff and having tools to support jurisdiction-specific data collection will be essential.
- **Coordinate learnings and best practices across health departments:** A national coordinating body can coordinate learnings and best practices across health departments. This coordination will support state and local health departments in a process of continual learning as they implement these activities related to abortion. While engaging in this national coordination, respecting, valuing, and supporting regional differences in how to approach this work in different contexts will be essential.

References

- 1 Berglas NF, Johns NE, Rosenzweig C, Hunter LA, Roberts SCM. State and local health department activities related to abortion: a web site content analysis. *J Public Health Manag Pract.* 2018;24(3):255-262.
- 2 Berglas NF, Wingo E, Woodruff K, Roberts SCM. Approaches, barriers, and facilitators to abortion-related work in U.S. health departments: perspectives of maternal and child health and family planning professionals. *BMC Public Health.* 2020;20(1):299.
- 3 Roberts SCM, Fuentes L, Berglas NF, Dennis AJ. A 21st-Century public health approach to abortion. *Am J Public Health.* 2017;107(12):1878-1882.

A Menu of Activities Related to Abortion for State and Local Health Departments

Organized by the Revised 10 Essential Public Health Servicesⁱ

Essential Public Health Service	Activity Related to Abortion
1 Assess and monitor health status, factors that influence health, and community needs and assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a Collect health statistics data, including demographic data, related to abortion to monitor patterns of use of abortion services in the jurisdiction. Data collected should ensure patient privacy, protect safety of providers, and not include more than the minimum information necessary.b Include data related to abortion in community health needs assessment and/or Title V Maternal and Child Health needs assessmentc Ensure community health assessments include abortion-related measures such as current capacity of abortion services in the jurisdiction and possibilities that need for/capacity of abortion services in the jurisdiction and neighboring jurisdictions could changed Collect data on pregnancy-related morbidity and mortalitye Develop a straightforward metric for health departments to use to assess the level of community need for all types of abortion services versus the availability of abortion services in their jurisdiction
2 Investigate, diagnose, and address health problems and hazards affecting the population	<ul style="list-style-type: none">a As part of efforts to monitor pregnancy-related morbidity and mortality, seek to identify patterns that may be due to restrictions on abortion care or a lack of accessible abortion services

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ⁱ Public Health National Center for Innovations (PHNCI) and the de Beaumont Foundation released a [revised 10 Essential Public Health Services framework](#) in September 2020.

Essential Public Health Service

Activity Related to Abortion

3 Communicate effectively to inform and educate people about health, factors that influence it and how to improve it

- a Inform people considering abortion about state and local laws related to abortion, including how these laws might affect their experiences with obtaining or ability to obtain an abortion and steps they can take to overcome these obstacles
- b Actively engage in two-way communication with populations seeking and having abortions to ensure materials related to abortion produced by the health department meet their needs
- c Prepare briefs, reports, and talking points about the scientific evidence related to abortion in general and the evidence base related to different policies related to abortion in order to inform and respond to policy proposals, public inquiry, and the media.
- d Provide evidence-based information on abortion, including the public health impact of not being able to obtain abortion
- e Ensure quality of informational materials related to pregnancy, including that they are gender inclusive; reflect nuances in the ways people feel about their pregnancies; acknowledge that not every pregnancy results in a birth, and that abortion is a common pregnancy outcome
- f Include abortion information in adolescent sexual health education and services
- g Review and update health department communications materials to ensure they do not stigmatize abortion and proactively seek to de-stigmatize abortion

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Essential Public Health Service	Activity Related to Abortion
<p>4 Strengthen, support, and mobilize communities and partnerships to improve health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Convene an abortion access working group or a sexual and reproductive health/justice workgroup b Engage faith communities that can provide a faith-based perspective on abortion that can support people having abortions c Engage with the community directly, especially people of color, immigrants, people who are disabled, young people, low income women who have one or more children, and people who are marginalized in other ways to learn about their experiences with abortion and obtaining abortions d Support community storytelling about abortion e Work with non-governmental organizations that can bring community-perspectives to explain how legislation will affect their communities f Partner with local abortion funds by including them in community events, including information about them in department materials and resources for individuals and health care providers, and connect them with funders and stakeholders g Participate in community-led efforts to address shame and stigma related to abortion, particularly where there is mistrust between people of color and health care providers, including abortion providers, and between people of color and government

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Essential Public Health Service	Activity Related to Abortion
<p>5 Create, champion, and implement policies, plans, and laws that impact health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Ensure that if the department is mandated by state law to create informed consent forms specific to abortion care, that the forms are evidence-based, relevant to, and minimally burdensome for abortion providers. If no such forms are mandated but the health department requires all health care providers to use informed consent forms, ensure that those forms are evidence-based, relevant to and useful for providers, including abortion providers. b Work on policy changes to expand Medicaid coverage for abortion to cover broader groups of people (such as people who are undocumented) c Provide information to inform policy change to reduce barriers to abortion services, such as by writing public facing reports about the science related to policy topics being considered by the legislature d Provide analysis of the programmatic, fiscal, and health impact of abortion-related bills and policies to health department leadership and others, including whether to recommend rejecting or accepting such bills. Conduct this analysis through a racial equity lens.
<p>6 Utilize legal and regulatory actions designed to improve and protect the public's health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Oversee abortion facility licensing using the same practices and protocols as for other facilities that provide similar health care. b Implement state-mandated information as prescribed by law when information is consistent with evidenceⁱⁱ

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ii. More discussion is needed about what health departments should do in the cases where content of stated mandated information prescribed by law is not evidence-based

Essential Public Health Service

Activity Related to Abortion

7 Assure an effective system that enables equitable access to the individual services and care needed to be healthy

- a Monitor availability of abortion services in the jurisdiction to ensure sufficient availability to meet community need
- b Maintain and disseminate information about availability of all abortion services, in and near jurisdiction
- c Address barriers to abortion by providing or supporting case management services for people seeking abortion; linking people seeking abortion with local abortion funds; arranging or providing transportation for people seeking abortion; paying for abortion when insurance does not cover it; and reducing barriers to using Medicaid for abortion
- d Ensure availability of post-abortion contraception, such as working with providers to bill contraception care and creating toolkits for post-abortion contraception
- e Build the capacity of primary care providers to start offering abortion care, for example by engaging in an abortion quality assurance project to increase availability of medication abortion in primary care
- f Plan for a possible future of needing to provide abortion care to people traveling from other states or for residents who will need to travel to other states
- g Provide referrals to abortion providers
- h Engage in person-centered options counseling in health department clinics and/or ensure that contracted providers offer this service
- i Offer screening, counseling, and referrals re: genetic anomalies in health department clinics and/or ensure that contracted providers offer these services
- j Ensure a trained and qualified abortion care workforce by advocating for and supporting the training of clinicians to become abortion providers
- k Reduce barriers to providing abortions, such as onerous reporting requirements and non-evidence-based regulations and by protecting against harassment by protestors
- l Support providers getting reimbursed by Medicaid to ensure they are able to obtain informed consent, ensure confidentiality of services, and make post-abortion contraception available

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Essential Public Health Service	Activity Related to Abortion
<p>8 Build and support a diverse and skilled public health workforce</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Recruit a public health workforce from the communities most affected by lack of abortion services or barriers to abortion services b Train health department clinical and public health staff on abortion, e.g. values clarification, abortion 101, providing adolescent-friendly care, public health professional roles, and reproductive justice, and to not assume every pregnant person they interact with wants to be pregnant c Employ community health workers and promotoras who do work related to abortion in communities d Provide evidence-based education to health department leadership on abortion-related topics, including evidence related to rationale for and impacts of abortion-related policies and regulations
<p>9 Improve and innovate public health functions through ongoing evaluation, research, and continuous quality improvement</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Research barriers to abortion care in the community, particularly for hard to reach and marginalized populations
<p>10 Build and maintain a strong organizational infrastructure for public health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a Ensure that public health leadership and governing boards (i.e. local county board, board of supervisors, city council, etc.) publicly include and describe availability and accessibility of abortion services as part of public health b Guide health department's work related to abortion to be consistent with public health values and frameworks c Collaborate across programs within the health department that work on different aspects relevant to abortion



ansirh@ucsf.edu



citymch@unmc.edu