

Meet the Fellow

Megan McCarthy, MPH

Host Lab: Glen F. Baker Public Health Laboratory,
Little Rock, Arkansas

Degree: Masters

Graduated: May 2023

School: University of Maryland

What is your science background? Degree(s) of study?

I was introduced to Biology and Chemistry from early college courses as well as Human Anatomy from previous EMT/Basic Life Support training and volunteer experience, but (it was) much more of a soft science background (psychology, sociology, public policy, etc.).

Tell us about your educational background?

I have a Bachelors in Communication Arts, dabbling in areas like marketing/advertising, journalism, public relations, as well as the visual arts such as graphic design, videography, and photography. I pursued a graduate degree in Public Health, focusing on social and behavioral theory and research related to health decision making, outcomes, and the influence of the social determinants of health on public health care. I gained experience in community-based research related to maternal and child health, as well as digital health and health communications research and strategies.

How did you hear about the Public Health Laboratory Fellowship Program?

I discovered this opportunity through LinkedIn, and have also heard about APHL from a few graduate school peers.

How did this fellowship match or exceed your expectations?

So far, this fellowship has exceeded my expectations. Mostly because I tried hard not to have too many before getting here. I did not have much of a laboratory science background, but the Quality Management and Informatics concentrations of this fellowship seemed like a good opportunity to apply my knowledge and interests in public health and communications while also gaining skills in a new areas. This fellowship introduced me to a wide-range of professionals dedicated to ensuring that the laboratory runs smoothly and efficiently, and many employees have backgrounds in a variety of fields which I did not expect!

Tell us what you learned from your mentor:

I've learned a lot about the different types of testing that is performed at a state public health laboratory (PHL). I've also learned about the ways a PHL is involved in the larger public health system and the strategic public health planning goals of a state. I've learned about the different types of research my mentor is involved in as a laboratory director and scientist. I also learned the importance of



communicating regularly with various laboratory supervisors to address specific needs and questions necessary for ensuring effective laboratory testing. In addition, I learned more about the various components that go into securing modern laboratory testing equipment such as grant research, writing, and funding allocation. Finally, my mentor has demonstrated qualities of leadership and support that have really inspired me over these last few months. Not only is she tapped into all the current events and conversations happening within the state public health laboratory, but she also looks to the future often for ways to grow, improve, and modernize the laboratory. This might include preparing for potential outbreaks, researching training and grant funding opportunities, professional development opportunities for her staff, and opting in to participate in assessments and strategic planning events that take place.

Tell us about your project assignments/laboratory roles:

I was project leader for coordinating their first ever state Laboratory System Improvement Program (L-SIP) assessment in collaboration with APHL. Working with my mentor (laboratory director), the Quality Assurance Director, and various laboratory supervisors and employees to create a diverse list of state laboratory system partners to invite and participate in facilitated discussions. In preparation for the L-SIP, I studied the assessment tool and guidelines to create reference materials and resources for invited participants to use throughout the assessment process. This event was also a great promotional opportunity for the AR PHL, which inspired the creation of an updated laboratory brochure, flyers, stickers, newsletters, and other promotional materials. Following the assessment, my main role now is to analyze the discussion themes, assessment scores, and main takeaways to create a final report for state laboratory system partners to review. The hope is that this report will address next steps forward for improving laboratory system collaboration and testing, as well as inspire future collaborative assessments and meetings to take place within the state public health laboratory

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system. Given my background in communications, I have also started to work closely with the Bioterrorism (BT) Outreach Coordinator here at the AR PHL to support his monthly digital newsletter creations and collaborate on a BT video series for the purpose of educating his audience of BT scientists and professionals on various select agents in an entertaining way. As this fellowship continues, I hope to continue engaging with laboratory staff and supervisors to help with updating various public-facing information such as sample submission instructions, website content, social media content, as well as contribute to outreach efforts by designing flyers, pamphlets, etc. that meet the needs of the communities that the state laboratory and health department work with.

How has your fellowship experience inspired you?

This fellowship experience has very much inspired me to step out of my comfort zone and learn as much about laboratory sciences as possible. Working for a state PHL has given me new found perspectives and appreciations for environmental and clinical testing that are so crucial for overall quality of life. It's also inspired my appreciation for quality improvement strategies and organization that are essential for executing safe and ethical testing services, as well as documenting necessary improvement steps. In addition to being a "student" again as a laboratory fellow, this role has inspired me to be a public health leader in my own right as well. I quickly realized the importance of being a health communications advocate and professional in a setting with laboratory scientists that have other priorities that occupy a lot of their time and work, but are also in need of modern communication resources to receive and share important information. This fellowship inspires me to continue to learn about the specific public health needs and barriers of the communities that the PHL surveilles through testing data, and consider ways that I can use my own knowledge, skills, and research interests

to support the important work of laboratory scientists around me, as well as the needs of the public and the state's overall public health improvement goals.

What do you believe the next step will be in your career path?

I believe the next steps for me will involve working in the health promotion/communications and health informatics field for the purpose of supporting a specific public health organization or entity. I also hope to continue my education in one way or another, perhaps through professional certifications or higher education opportunities. I think that a Health Education Certification such as CHES would be very beneficial for my future career path. I'm a firm believer that one of the best ways to learn is through teaching, so it's my hope that my future career path will also involve collaboration with other passionate public health professionals and educators across a variety of expertise.

How would you describe the APHL Fellowship when recommending other students to apply?

I would describe the APHL Fellowship as a sort of "mixed bag" experience because it's full of so many different and exciting laboratory science learning opportunities. It's important to have an understanding of your own research interests and skills before going into this experience to avoid imposter syndrome as much as possible, but also so that you can contribute to the environment that you will be in for a year (or maybe 2) as best you can. I would remind applicants to keep an open mind since this opportunity offers fellows the chance to experience working in a public health environment that they may have never considered working in before and to also try to have fun! I also try to remind myself that this fellowship experience will only be a small part of my career trajectory in the grand scheme of things, but it offers the potential to completely shift what I thought I knew or wanted with a public health degree in such a short time frame.