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EMERGING LEADER PROGRAM IMPACT ASSESSMENT CAREER GROWTH

The Association of Public Health Laboratories' (APHL's) Emerging Leader Program (ELP) is a long-standing, cohort-based leadership development initiative, supported in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), designed to strengthen the leadership capacity of the public health laboratory workforce.

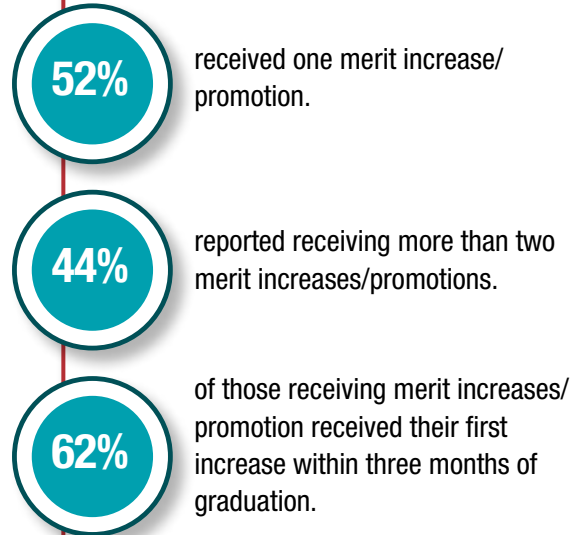
Since its conceptualization in 2006, the ELP has offered a variety of training programs for public health laboratory professionals, focusing on developing leadership skills and building the capabilities essential for effective laboratory leadership.

[Previously published](#) findings from APHL's ELP demonstrate the effectiveness of leadership development among participants. Building on those findings, additional data shows the beneficial impacts on participants' career progression and advancement in the field of laboratory science.

This snapshot focuses specifically on career progression outcomes associated with participation in the ELP, including promotions, merit increases and expected leadership responsibilities among alumni across career stages. Data is drawn from the 2023 ELP Alumni Career Progression Survey and 2025 in-depth alumni interviews. Findings indicate how leadership development translates into measurable career advancement in the field of laboratory science among ELP alumni.

Career Progression at a Glance

Among survey respondents (n=101), 68% reported receiving at least one merit increase/promotion since completing the ELP. Among this majority:



Career Advancement Across Job Categories

Most Emerging Leader Alumni Network (ELAN) members across different job categories advanced from their initial roles, especially **among laboratory scientists, where 59% moved to the next career level. Laboratory Assistant/Deputy Directors progressed the fastest, with 78% advancing to full director-level roles.** Participants who began the ELP as laboratory directors generally remained at that same level, which is expected, given the limited opportunities for advancement beyond such a senior role.

The in-depth interviews supported the survey findings, as those who had not received a promotion since completing the ELP cited organizational restrictions as the main reasons. Further, this minority that remained in the same position or moved laterally since completing the ELP noted that they still received greater responsibility.

Merit Recognition and Organizational Value

In addition to promotions, alumni reported strong patterns of merit recognition following ELP participation. Among alumni respondents, **68% reported receiving at least one merit increase after completing the program**, with nearly two-thirds receiving their first increase within three months of graduation. Of those receiving merit increases, 44% reported receiving more than two merit increases since completing ELP.

From Recognition to Retention

Merit recognition and promotions are well-established mechanisms for acknowledging performance and reducing the likelihood that high-performing employees will seek opportunities elsewhere.

Given system-wide data from the 2024 APHL Workforce Survey indicating that **39% of the public health laboratory workforce intends to leave their positions within four years¹**, programs that support internal advancement and recognition are increasingly critical.

Findings from the ELP Career Progression Survey suggest that ELP contributes to these advancement mechanisms, strengthening workforce stability within public health laboratories.

Perceived Career Value of ELP Participation

Beyond measurable career outcomes, alumni overwhelmingly viewed their participation in ELP as valuable to their professional growth:



Reported that ELP improved their leadership abilities.



Would recommend ELP to public health laboratory staff.

Alumni consistently described increased confidence, readiness and visibility as key outcomes of their participation.

Interview findings echoed these survey results. **Eighty-one percent of the alumni interviewees reported that ELP participation influenced both their own career decisions and their supervisors' decisions to advance them.**

Another recurring theme was the value of networking and peer support in enabling career growth and leadership effectiveness. Many interviewees noted the value that these connections provided in helping them navigate the laboratory science field, share best practices and feel more confident in leadership roles.

“I went into it expecting to grow a little, but ultimately, I discovered that I grew a lot as a leader, and my knowledge of communication, facilitation, and leadership was expanded tremendously.”

— Cohort 11 graduate

Advancing Careers and Supporting Retention

With evidence showing that career advancement strategies, such as merit increases and promotions, support employee engagement and retention, and considering ongoing hiring and retention challenges in the public sector¹, programs like the ELP are crucial to supporting the public health laboratory workforce.

Laboratory directors emphasized that ELP equips participants with the confidence and skills needed to pursue advancement and take on greater leadership responsibility, reducing reliance on and the cost of external recruitment.

Given the continued recruitment difficulties² and projected retirements within public health laboratories, the ELP significantly contributes to strengthening the internal leadership pipelines.

“They [ELP alumni] gained confidence in themselves. They were highly competent in their jobs, but I believe the program helped them gain the confidence to consider taking the next step to something bigger.”

**~ Former Laboratory Director/
APHL Senior Leader**

Using Evidence to Strengthen and Improve ELP

Findings from this impact assessment inform APHL's ongoing approach to continuous quality improvement for the Emerging Leader Program. Participant feedback, alumni insights, and laboratory leadership perspectives are routinely used to refine program content, delivery formats and support structures. This iterative learning approach helps ensure that ELP remains responsive to evolving workforce needs while supporting leadership development, workforce stability and responsible stewardship of public resources.

How This Snapshot Was Assessed

This snapshot draws from a broader assessment of the Emerging Leader Program and is informed by multiple sources of information, including program records, an alumni career progression survey, and a total of 59 individual interviews with ELP alumni, laboratory directors, and APHL current and former staff. Survey results were summarized to understand leadership and career outcomes, and interview responses were reviewed to identify common themes related to leadership development, application of skills, and workforce outcomes.

Acknowledgements

APHL gratefully acknowledges the public health laboratory directors, ELP alumni, current ELP participants, and APHL staff, both current and former, who generously shared their time and perspectives through interviews and surveys. Their contributions were essential to understanding the impact of the program and to informing ongoing efforts to strengthen leadership development across the public health laboratory system.

Related Publication: [Leadership Development: APHL Emerging Leader Program Impact Assessment](#)

References

1. APHL. 2024 Public Health Laboratory Workforce Survey Summary. <https://www.aphl.org/aboutAPHL/publications/Documents/QSA-Workforce-Profile-2024-Survey-Summary.pdf>
2. U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO). Actions Needed to Improve Recruitment and Retention. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106527>