Leadership Development

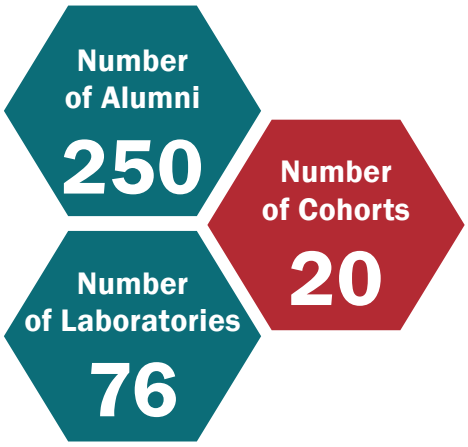
APHL Emerging Leader Program Impact Assessment

The Association of Public Health Laboratories' (APHL's) Emerging Leader Program (ELP) is a long-standing, cohort-based leadership development initiative designed to strengthen the leadership capacity of the public health laboratory workforce. At a time when laboratories face workforce shortages, succession challenges and increasing demands, ELP represents a strategic investment in developing leaders who can sustain and strengthen public health systems.

History and Background

Early concepts informing ELP programming were conceived in 2006 through APHL's National Center for Public Health Laboratory Leadership (NCPHLL). These early initiatives emphasized team-based and experiential learning approaches. Since its inception, the ELP has offered a variety of annual training programs for public health laboratory professionals, focusing on developing leadership skills and building the capabilities essential for effective laboratory leadership. It has successfully graduated 250 public health laboratory professionals representing 76 unique public health laboratories in the United States. Over time, the ELP curriculum has evolved in response to the needs of public health laboratories, providing participants with numerous practical tools and resources. To further expand access, the program has transitioned from its original in-person model to include hybrid and fully virtual modalities.

Cohort sizes varied over the years, currently including nearly 20 participants in each modality, including personnel from public health laboratories across the US. The participants also extend beyond US public health laboratories to include staff from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), APHL and laboratory professionals from Canada.



"ELP gave me a lot of tools and made me a better leader, and I am still growing."

— Laboratory director/ Cohort 9 graduate

The ELP curriculum consists of networking opportunities, skill development workshops, leadership exercises and professional development with opportunities for coaching, where participants receive one-on-one support to enhance their self-confidence, achieve their goals and improve their performance. Coaches are comprised of APHL leadership program alumni and staff members from CDC and APHL.

Once participants complete the ELP, they become part of the Emerging Leadership Program Alumni Network (ELAN), which helps graduates continue networking, professionally develop, and strengthen their leadership skills.

Building the Leaders Who Build Stronger Public Health Laboratories

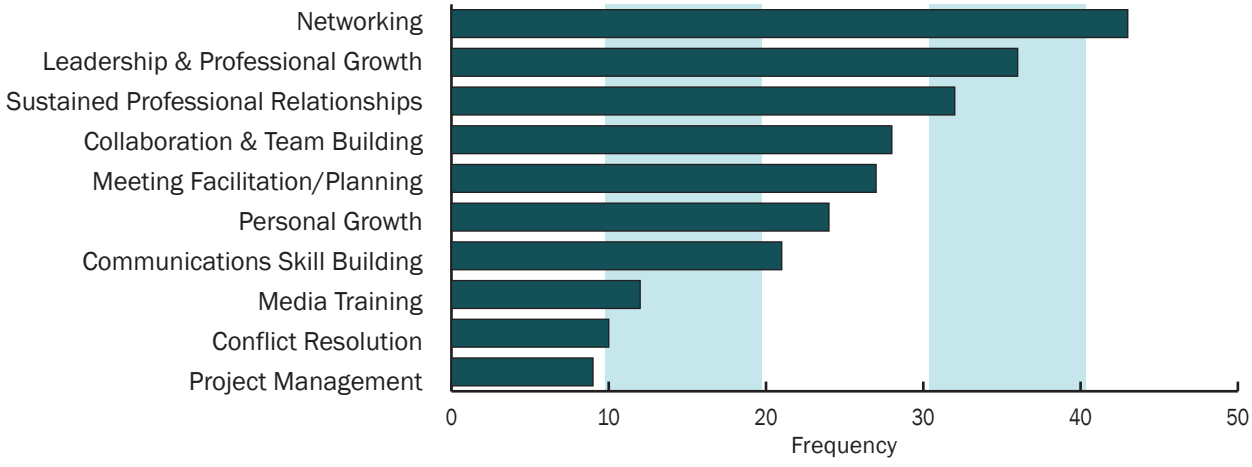
The ELP's dynamic curriculum emphasizes team building, communication, collaboration and networking. During ELAN interviews, many recalled their ELP experiences as meaningful and that the program significantly improved their relational and networking skills. Often, alumni focused on how they were able to connect with cohort members, coaches and program staff, as well as how they maintained these professional relationships over time.

Analysis of ELAN interviews also revealed how the ELP promotes collaboration and team building, enabling alumni to work with a diverse range of laboratory professionals from different types of laboratories. In addition, alumni highlighted enhancements in project and organizational skills such as meeting planning, project management and practical team-building experience, which helped them lead initiatives more effectively.

Overall, data shows that the ELP program provides participants with a blend of networking, leadership, and interpersonal skills that strengthen their professional abilities.

Lastly, the analysis suggests that the program supports the development of personal and communication skills, with alumni noting improvements in communication, conflict resolution, media interaction and self-awareness through coaching and workstyle assessments.

Figure 1. Areas of Professional Growth Attributed to Participation in ELP



Impact on Public Health Laboratories Insights from Laboratory Leaders

In addition to alumni reflections, laboratory directors shared observations about how ELP participation translated into leadership growth within their laboratories.

Public health laboratory directors observed changes in leadership behaviors among ELP alumni, including improvements in teamwork, communication, networking and collaboration. ELAN respondents reported a strong perceived impact. On a five-point scale, the program's influence on leadership development was notable, with an average rating of 4.7 for both leadership growth and preparation for future leadership roles.

Survey Highlights

100% of alumni reported leadership growth through the ELP.

98% of respondents recommend ELP of public health laboratory staff.

Together, findings indicate that ELP produces sustained leadership gains that extend beyond individual development, shaping how alumni lead teams, contribute to laboratory operations, and remain engaged in the public health laboratory workforce

From Leadership Development to Workforce Stability

To remain effective and resilient, public health laboratories must prioritize strategies that retain a skilled workforce as better-equipped leaders to reduce burnout and turnover. Data from the 2024 APHL Workforce Survey[1] which reflect responses from the broader public health laboratory workforce, indicate that 39% of respondents intend to leave their positions within four years.

Retention

80% of alumni remain in public health laboratories.

98% remain in the public health field.

In contrast, findings from the ELP Alumni Career Progression survey, focused specifically on ELP participants, show strong retention among program alumni: 80% remain employed in the same laboratory, and 98% continue working within the public health sector, either in different laboratories or federal agencies. Given evidence that replacing an employee can cost up to twice their annual salary[2], these outcomes position the ELP as a critical investment in workforce stability and responsible fiscal management.

Workforce-related research shows that employee turnover carries high operational and financial costs in public-sector and healthcare settings. Leadership development and succession planning are widely recognized as cost-conscious approaches to supporting workforce stability and organizational resilience.[3, 4]

Laboratory directors who were interviewed also conveyed the potential cost savings of the ELP. Laboratory leadership interviewees reported that their primary motivation for nominating staff to the ELP was to strengthen leadership skills within their teams and support long-term succession planning. As the data from the 2024 APHL Workforce Survey[5] shows, one in two directors (50%) plan to leave their position within the next four years, with retirement being the most reported reason (31.7%). Based on these self-reported data, approximately 16% of current directors (13 of 82) expect to retire in the near future. These findings emphasize the need to invest in leadership development and succession planning now, to help ensure continuity, institutional knowledge and workforce stability in the years ahead.

> ***"Having a manager nominate you, clicks that they see you as a leader, so I should see myself as a leader."***
>
> ***— Cohort 15 graduate***

Interviewed laboratory directors viewed the program as a valuable, cost-efficient option for building internal leadership capacity. Many noted limited access to professional development opportunities mainly due to funding restrictions in their jurisdictions. While other leadership programs exist, the ELP is unique and specifically tailored to the needs of public health laboratories. It provides participants with opportunities to connect, network and learn directly from leaders in the field, which public health laboratories would not otherwise be able to fund and/or offer.

Building Workforce Capacity Through a Cost-conscious Workforce Strategy

Evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of leadership development, combined with data collected and analyzed from the ELP, underscores the critical role the ELP plays in strengthening the public health laboratory workforce, thus public health laboratories as a whole. Strong and effective leadership can have a lasting impact on an organization.

According to the Association for Talent Development, "When organizations create space for meaningful development, they tap into that desire and foster lasting commitment in return."[6] This is exactly what APHL is doing through the ELP, providing public health laboratory professionals with an opportunity to develop their skills and effectively lead, no matter their position or title. These immeasurable effects include more resilient local health systems, better emergency response capacity, higher quality workforce engagement and stronger financial stewardship of public dollars, among many other benefits.

Using Evidence to Strengthen and Improve ELP

Findings from this impact assessment inform APHL's ongoing approach to continuous quality improvement for the ELP. 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 Impact Was Assessed

This impact brief represents one of three briefs developed from a broader assessment of the ELP and is informed by multiple sources of information, including program records (i.e., existing program surveys, focus groups, pre-tests and post-tests, curricula and stories of change), an alumni career progression survey, and 59 individual interviews with ELAN members, 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. Insights were examined across sources to ensure findings reflected consistent experiences across cohorts.

Acknowledgements

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Association of Public Health Laboratories

The Association of Public Health Laboratories (APHL) works to strengthen laboratory systems serving the public's health in the US and globally. APHL's member laboratories protect the public's health by monitoring and detecting infectious and foodborne diseases, environmental contaminants, terrorist agents, genetic disorders in newborns and other diverse health threats.

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