

Meet Our Public Health Laboratory Directors

A Snapshot from APHL's 2024 Workforce Profile Survey

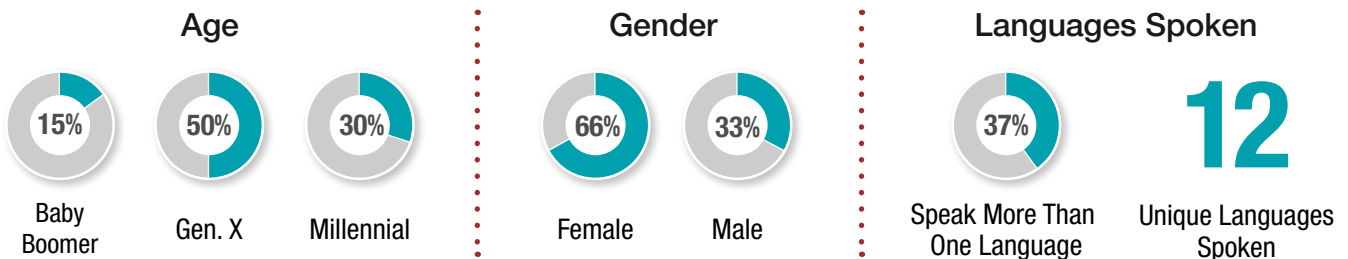
Behind every test result, emergency response or new surveillance system, there is a public health laboratory director at the helm, leading the science, the strategy and the people to fulfill the core public health laboratory services. Whether leading public health laboratories, environmental laboratories or specialty testing programs, these directors play a central role in protecting public health.

This snapshot includes data from 82 laboratory directors and directors of Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA)-certified laboratories from across the US who completed the Association of Public Health Laboratories' (APHL) 2024 Public Health Laboratory Workforce Profiles survey. This population represents a mix of generations: 50% Generation X, 30% Baby Boomers and 15% Millennials. Of this group of leaders, 33% identify as male and 66% as female. In addition, 37% speak more than one language, with 12 unique languages reported. These individuals are responsible for overseeing the laboratory's service quality, compliance and overall performance.

What else do we know about them? What backgrounds do they come from? How much experience do they bring? What does their work look like today? To answer these questions, APHL turned to the survey data and discovered a group of deeply committed professionals with strong scientific training, decades of experience and a workload that rarely ends at 5:00 pm.

The numbers tell a compelling story: Public health laboratory directors are full-time leaders, experienced scientists and dedicated stewards of their teams and communities.

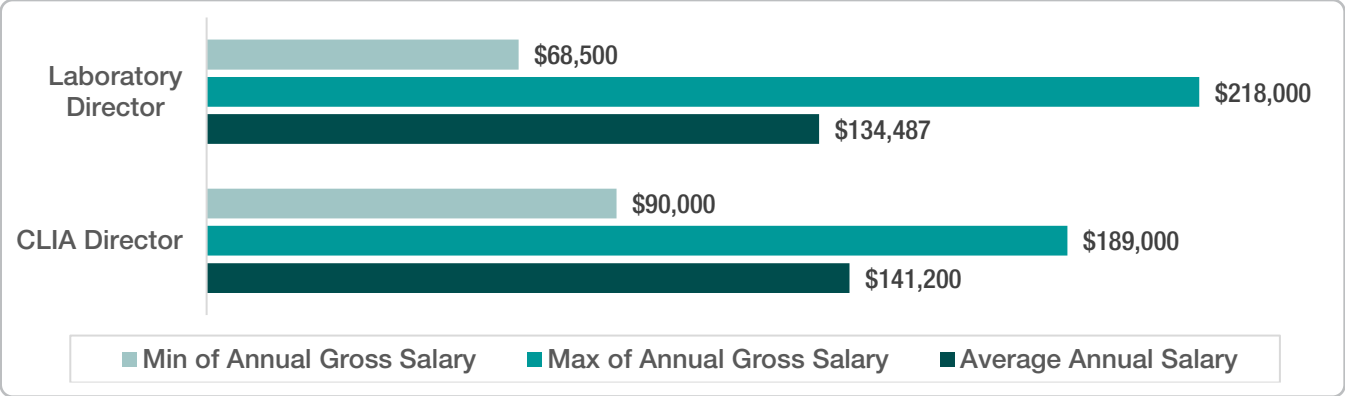
Laboratory Director Demographics and Characteristics



Salary

As shown in **Figure 1**, directors report a wide salary range, from around \$70,000 to \$218,000 annually. This variation reflects the regional cost of living, laboratory size and years of service, rather than employment status.

Figure 1. Average Annual Salary by Job Classification



Workload

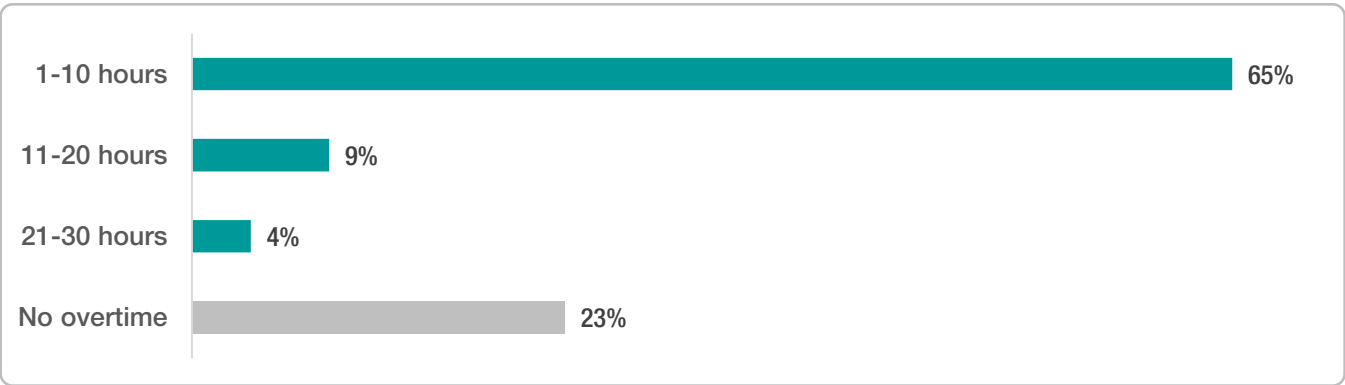
A Full-time Commitment

According to the data, 97.3% of respondents to this question have a full-time role within their public health laboratory.* Only two reported working part-time, with one citing consistent overtime. This speaks volumes: full-time leadership is expected because the responsibilities demand it.

Beyond Standard Hours

Workload data in **Figure 2** shows that nearly 65% of Laboratory Directors work a minimum of 1–10 hours of overtime each week, with some reporting up to 30 hours. This ongoing commitment goes beyond emergency periods and suggests that a part-time model would not meet the role’s demands.

Figure 2. Current Weekly Overtime Reported by Laboratory Director



* This report is based on responses from Laboratory Directors and CLIA Directors in APHL’s 2024 Public Health Laboratory Workforce Profiles survey. Although laboratory type, size and state were collected, laboratory names were not, so it cannot be determined if there are multiple directors per laboratory or whether part-time consultants participated. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Education and Experience

Strong Academic and Scientific Foundation

Laboratory and CLIA directors have strong scientific backgrounds and hold advanced degrees. Data shows in **Figure 3** that around 65.9% possess a doctoral degree, including PhDs, DrPHs, MDs and other terminal degrees. These qualifications demonstrate extensive training in laboratory science and research.

Their fields of study, shown in **Figure 4**, further highlight this expertise. Common areas include Microbiology (25.6%), Molecular Biology (15.9%), and Biology/Zoology (13.4%), along with Environmental Science, Public Health, and Biomedical Science. This academic background enables directors to lead technically complex programs, respond to emerging threats, and guide multidisciplinary teams.

Figure 3. Educational Attainment of Laboratory Directors

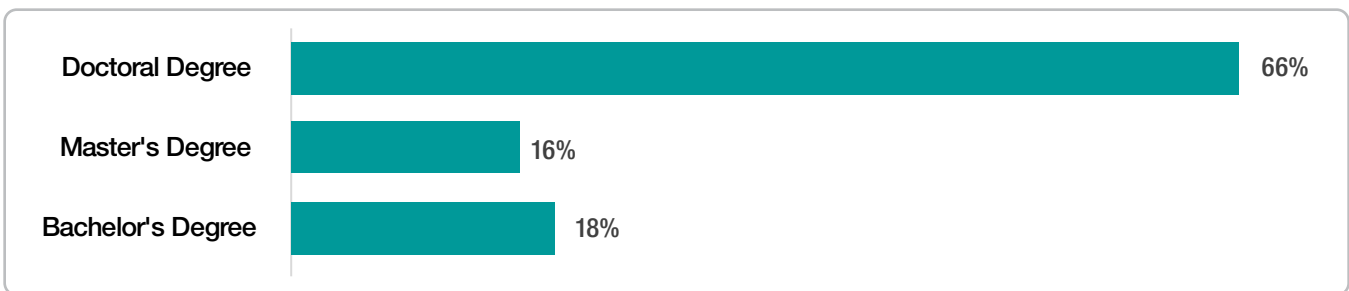
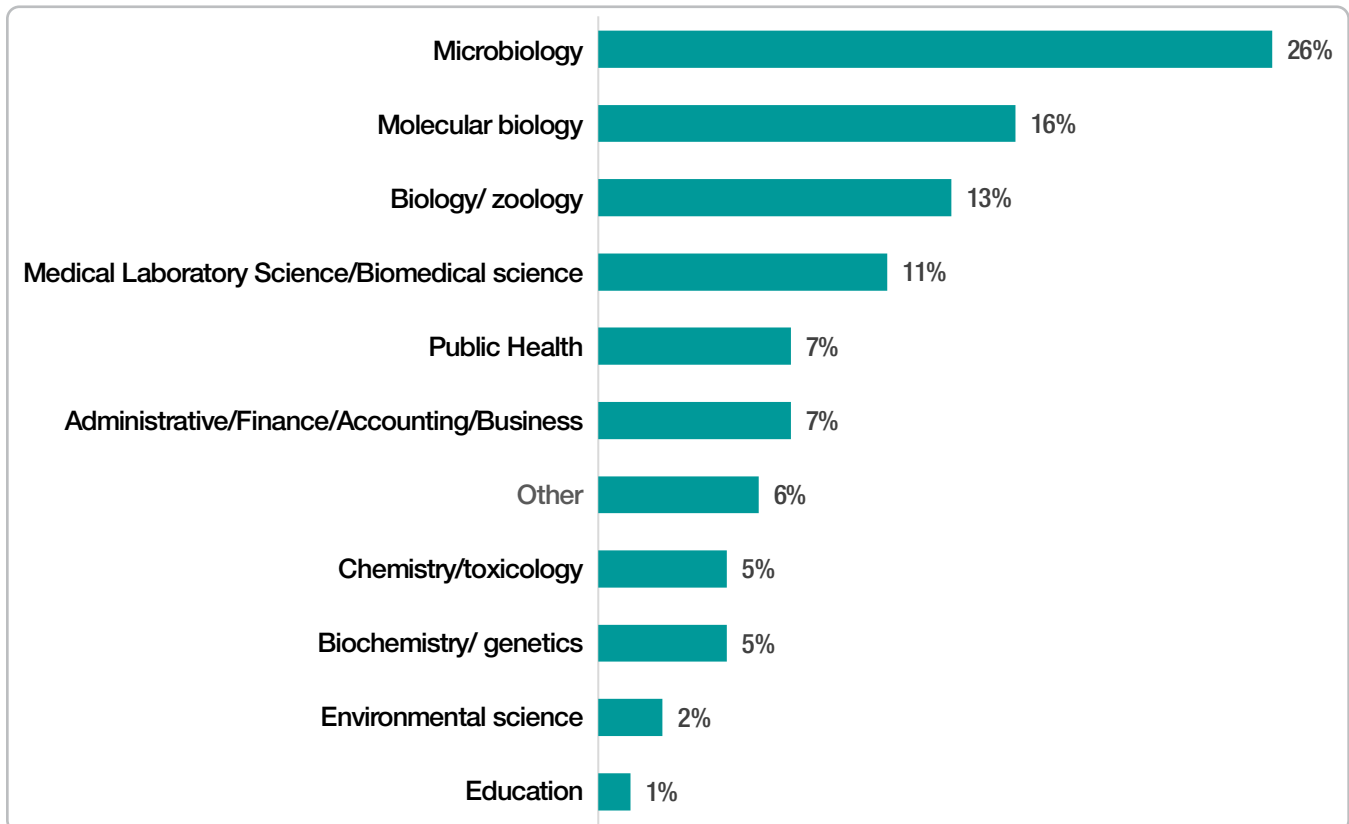


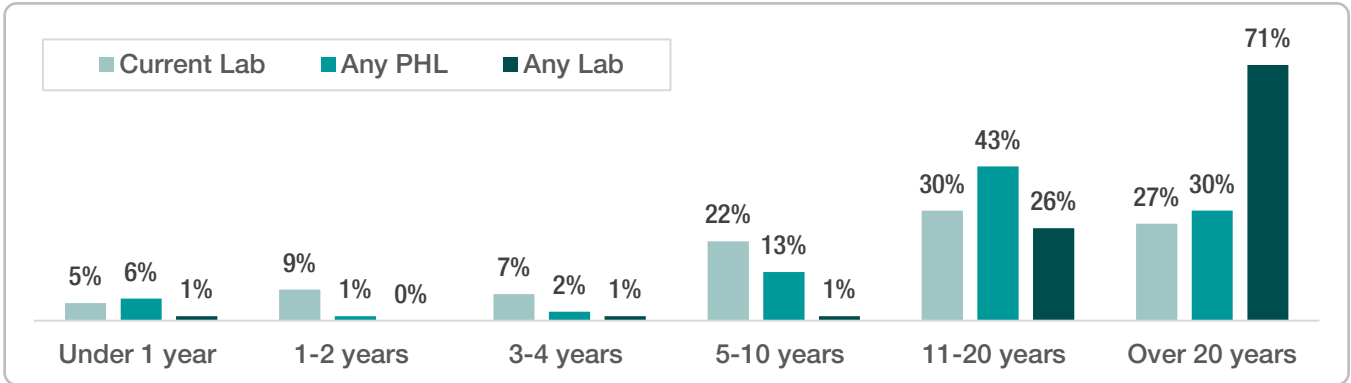
Figure 4. Laboratory Directors' Field of Study



Decades of Institutional Knowledge

The data shows in **Figure 5** that over 70.7% of Laboratory Directors have 20+ years of experience in any laboratory setting, with 30.5% having worked 11+ years at their current laboratory. Many also report long-standing service, especially within public health laboratories. This level of experience indicates deep institutional knowledge and leadership continuity, which are hard to replace and even harder to replicate.

Figure 5. Laboratory Experience of Directors



Job Satisfaction and Strain

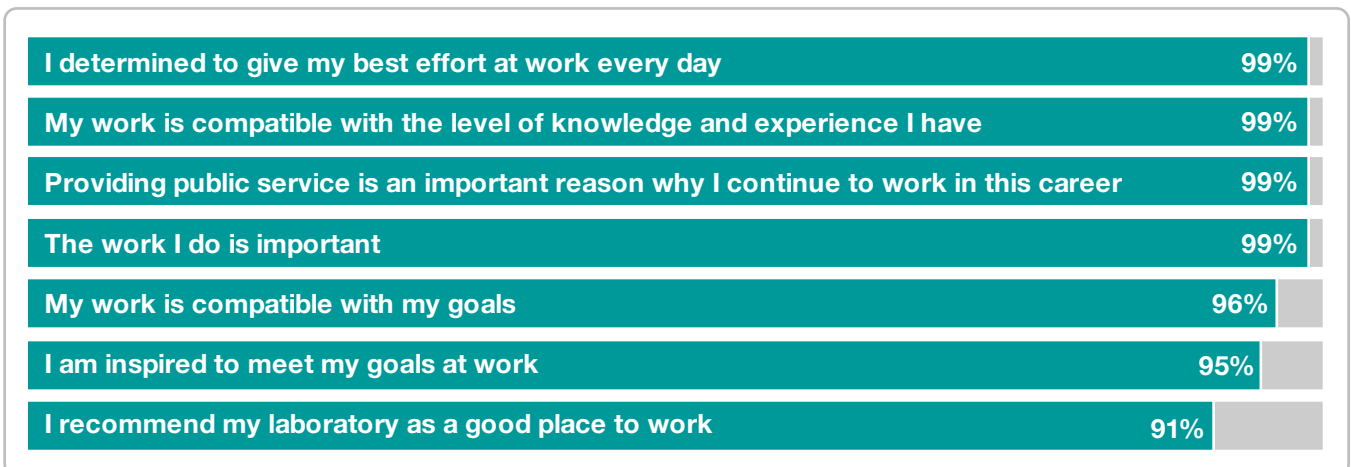
Strong Purpose and Motivation

Public health laboratory directors report a strong sense of purpose and motivation in their roles, as shown in **Figure 6**:

- 98.8% are determined to give their best effort every day.
- 95.1% feel inspired to meet their goals.
- 91.5% would recommend their lab as a good place to work.
- 96.3–98.8% say their work aligns with their goals, skills, and their commitment to public service.

These responses reflect a deep connection to the mission of public health and a continued dedication to serving their communities.

Figure 6. Laboratory Director’s Motivation and Job Alignment



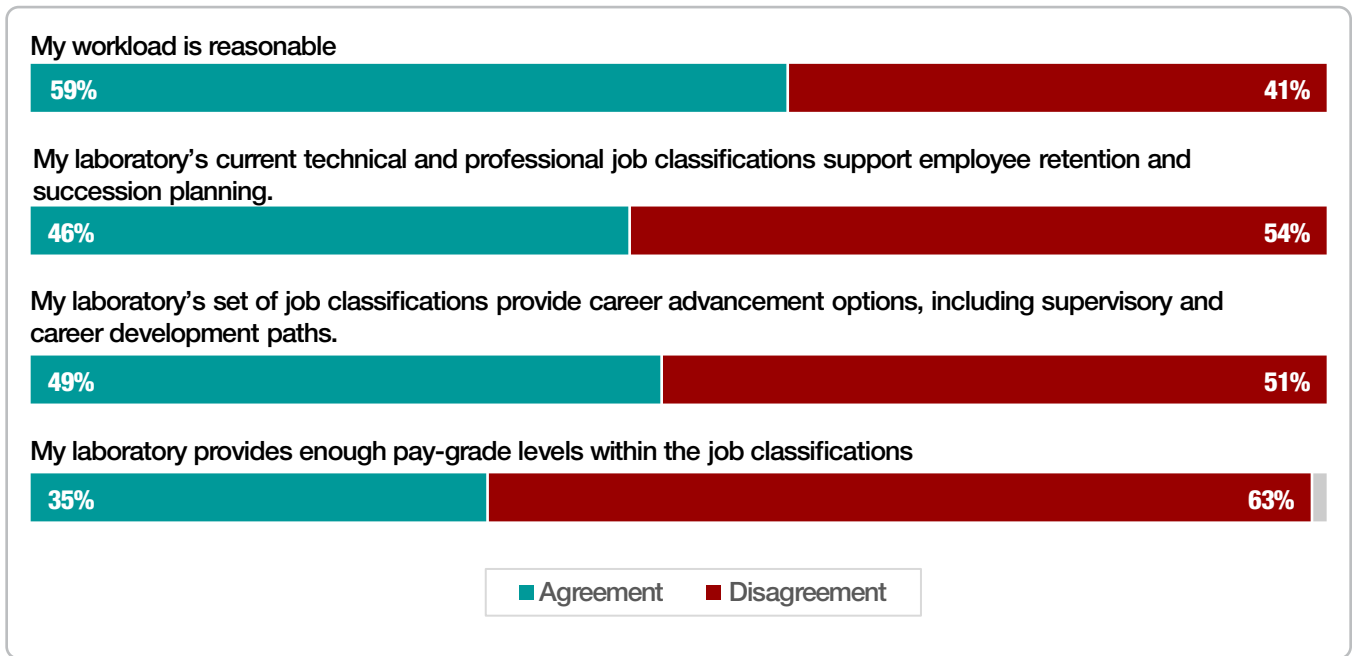
Workplace Challenges

While many directors feel supported by their teams and connected to the organization’s mission, the data revealed several workplace challenges, as shown in **Figure 7**:

- Over half (53.7%) disagreed that their job classification supports succession planning.
- 63.4% said their lab doesn’t provide enough pay-grade levels within classifications.
- 51.2% disagreed that there are clear career advancement options.
- 41.5% felt their workload is not reasonable.

These findings highlight key areas where structural support and staffing strategies need refinement.

Figure 6. Laboratory Director’s Satisfaction with the Laboratory Environment



Employee Retention

In addition, 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 the data, we anticipate that 16% (13 of 82) of directors will retire in the near future. This expected turnover emphasizes the need to invest in leadership development and succession planning now, so that the strength of today’s workforce is maintained for tomorrow. Understanding who they are also helps better support them and ensures our laboratory systems are in capable hands for future challenges.

Addressing Workplace Challenges

The challenges identified above must be addressed not only at the national level but also at the state and local levels, where the effects of leadership turnover can be felt most strongly. At the national level, APHL has actively worked to address these issues through various programs designed to support the next generation of laboratory leaders.

Programs such as the [DrPH Program](#), [Emerging Leader Program \(ELP\)](#), [Emerging Leader Alumni Network \(ELAN\)](#), the [Board Certification Exam Boot Camp](#), and the [Laboratory Leaders of Today \(LLOT\)](#) initiative aim to provide targeted professional development and strengthen leadership capacity.

- **ELP and ELAN:** Specifically focus on developing leadership at all levels of the public health laboratory system.
- **Board Certification Exam Boot Camp:** Offers a supportive community for those seeking director-level roles, providing resources and expert guidance for board certification.
- **LLOT:** Expands participation to deputy/assistant directors to prepare those leaders to step into director roles.
- The **Leadership Development** pathway, along with **mentorship opportunities**, enhances the core skills needed for successful leadership roles.

These programs, along with others, help create pathways for individuals to move into leadership positions, especially as many directors approach retirement. By building the future leadership pipeline, APHL not only addresses immediate staffing challenges but also ensures a sustainable, well-prepared leadership structure for the future of public health laboratories.



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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