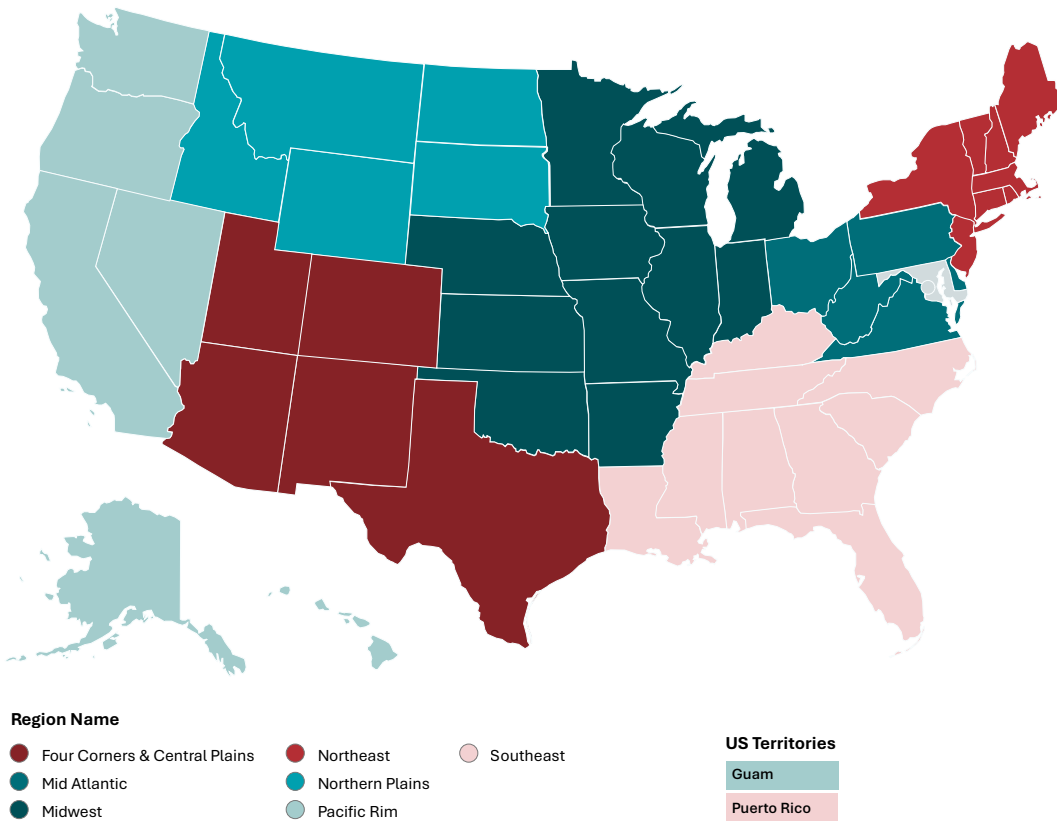


# Regional Consortia Impact Brief



## Background

Regional Consortia help public health laboratories work together to advance a shared mission to strengthen laboratory-based public health services and better protect communities. Through these consortia, organized groups of geographically clustered APHL member laboratories share testing services, expert advice and other important resources. Built on strong professional relationships, these networks give laboratories opportunities to join training events, access shared testing capabilities, receive support for CDC- and APHL-funded projects and collaborate on quality improvement efforts of regional interest.

The Regional Consortia have a well-documented history of success.<sup>1</sup> The idea of establishing a regional consortium within the public health laboratory community began in the 1970s with the New England states and expanded in 2006 with the Northern Plains states. From 2015 to 2019, growing discussions about the need for a unified approach to workforce

## Impact at a Glance

- ✓ 16 innovation and quality improvement grants across all seven consortia
- ✓ 48 public health laboratory professionals participated in peer-to-peer laboratory trips
- ✓ Tabletop exercises and scenario planning that have strengthened continuity of operations plans
- ✓ Measurable improvements in quality, safety and preparedness

Regional Consortia

7

States +  
District of  
Columbia, Guam  
and Puerto Rico

49

Unique  
Laboratories

68

Laboratory  
Professionals

314

development and continuity of operations, along with recognition of region-specific challenges, increased interest in creating additional consortia, resulting in the creation of the Southeast ColLABorators, Mid-Atlantic Consortium, Midwest Consortium, Pacific Rim Consortium, and the Four Corners and Central Plains Consortium.<sup>2</sup>

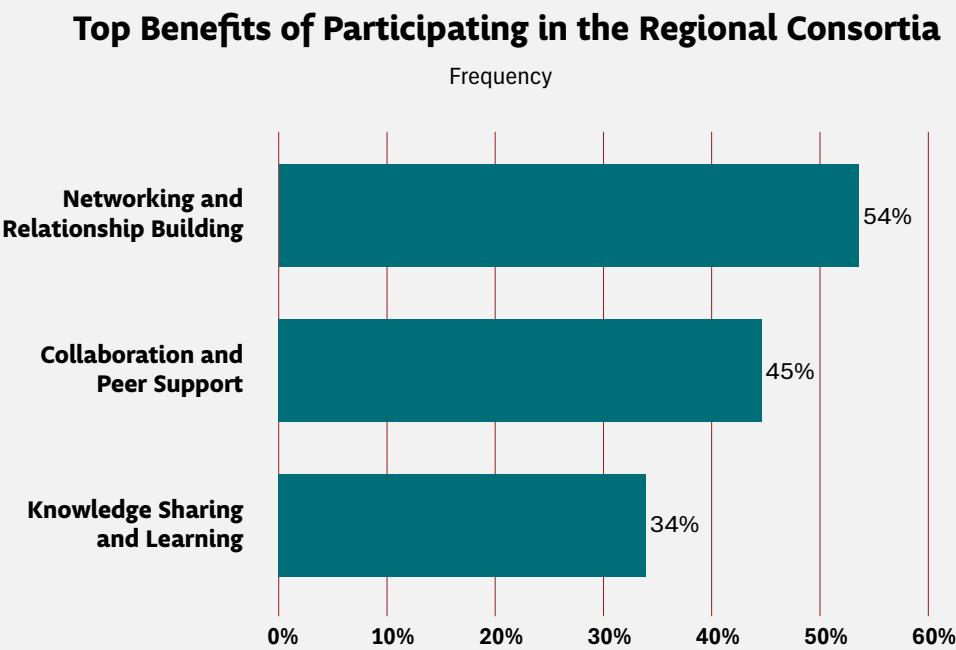
Currently, the Regional Consortia comprises seven regions representing 49 states and the District of Columbia, some US territories and other municipalities, 68 unique public health laboratories and over 300 laboratory professionals.

*“I feel like I can call anybody in [my consortium] and they’re going to step up and help me out.”*  
— Southeast ColLABorators Consortium Member

# The Power of Relationships in Advancing Public Health Laboratories

To better understand the effectiveness and impact of Regional Consortia, APHL has routinely collected both informal and formal data from participants. These conversations have provided rich qualitative insights into how the Regional Consortia are experienced on the ground, informing various APHL publications.<sup>1,2,3</sup> In 2017, APHL interviewed 22 regional consortia members, and in 2025, APHL hosted focus groups with regional consortia members to assess their perceived impact of the program. Most recently, a Regional Consortia Evaluation Survey was distributed in early 2026 to all consortium members to gather insights into the main benefits of participating in their consortium.

There is a clear common theme among participants across all data sources: the main benefits of the consortia are **relationships and collaboration**.



The report on the 2017 interviews with laboratory directors stated, “By far, the most frequently cited advantage to the state-driven network approach is building long-term relationships leading to collaboration among peers. Not only do laboratory directors develop relationships, but senior leadership and technical supervisors also have the opportunity to interact with like-minded professionals in their nearby states.”<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1. Thematic Findings from 2026 Regional Consortia Impact Survey on Benefits of Participation, N=61.

*“Whenever new information, resources, or solutions are needed, the consortium serves as the first point of contact. The expertise and experience of colleagues across the four partner states provide a reliable foundation for informed decision-making and rapid problem-solving. This collective knowledge base helps us identify what works well, what should be avoided, and where adjustments can lead to better outcomes.”*

— Northern Plains Consortium Member

This same benefit was echoed by participants in the 2025 regional consortia focus groups. Members primarily focused on the fact that relationships formed through participation in the regional consortia have lasting impacts that enhance their public health laboratory as a whole.

**Many members emphasized that in-person, face-to-face interaction is essential for building relationships and fostering collaboration across the region.** Focus group participants described these in-person meetings as critical opportunities to strengthen connections and align strategic priorities.

Survey respondents reinforced this perspective on the importance of in-person meetings. A thematic analysis of open-ended responses indicated:

- Relationships that formed in-person enabled faster, easier collaboration later.
- Without in-person meetings, laboratories would become more siloed and less willing or able to support one another.
- Virtual formats limit in-depth discussion and spontaneous learning critical for laboratory professionals.
- Certain learning experiences are impossible to replicate virtually.

## From Collaboration to Impact: Measurable Gains in Quality, Safety and Preparedness

While the effects of relationships and collaboration can often be immeasurable and understated, focus group participants and survey respondents readily identified how the relationships formed through participation in the Regional Consortia have driven measurable improvements in laboratory quality, safety and preparedness.

- **Quality management and continuous quality improvement.** Improvements to quality systems and compliance readiness, such as CLIA audit preparation, validation and verification templates, quality assurance document updates, audit checklists and strengthened quality management systems. The Regional Consortia also provides a space for laboratory professionals to get real-time feedback for continuous quality improvement.
- **Standardized practices and increased consistency.** Multiple laboratories reported adopting shared templates for method verification and validation. This allowed laboratories to align best practices and improve consistency in how new assays are implemented and reviewed.
- **Shared services to optimize reach and increase volume, especially during surge capacity.** This strengthened continuity of operations and preparedness through surge testing, emergency response exercises, tabletop scenarios and cross-state emergency coordination.

*“One of the networking benefits [in the Regional Consortia] is that it results in consistency across the nation, that’s really important.”*

— Mid-Atlantic Consortium Member

*“Through [Regional Consortia in-person meetings], our lab director has established a good working relationship with [a neighboring state] lab director. This relationship has made it possible to ask for assistance when certain tests need to be contracted out. The most recent instance of this is when we needed assistance with testing rabies samples. Without this assistance, we would have had to shut down that program and notify our state agency partners.”*

— Northeast Public Health Laboratory Consortium Member

- **Enhanced innovation (learned new processes, instrumentation and/or practices).** The Regional Consortia creates an environment where laboratories can test, adapt and scale new ideas more quickly through shared learning and collaboration.
- **Leadership development.** Many laboratories reported that they were able to refine their leadership skills through peer learning. The Regional Consortia provides participants with a space to learn from other laboratory leaders, build leadership skills and gain access to mentorship. This is critical, as turnover at the leadership level in public health laboratories continues. According to APHL membership

data, over 40% of laboratory directors have retired since the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing a community for new laboratory leaders to learn from each other is more important now than ever.

#### As a Result of Participating in a Regional Consortium

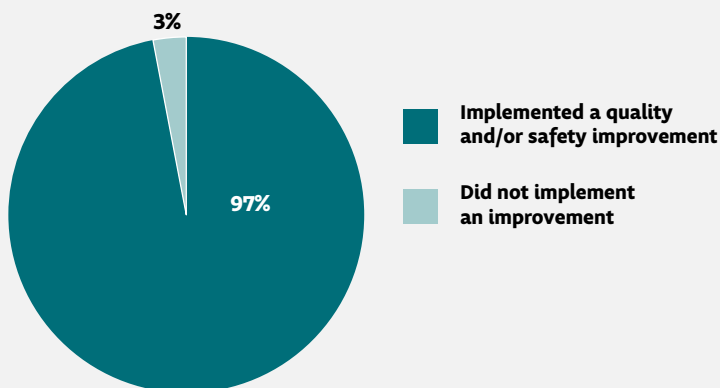


Figure 2. Findings from 2026 Regional Consortia Impact Survey, N=61.

The Regional Consortia clearly cultivate a collaborative environment that strengthens laboratories far beyond individual gains. **By building trusted relationships and creating formal collaboratives, participating laboratories are better prepared, more innovative and more aligned in their quality practices.** These connections not only enhance day-to-day operations but also equip laboratories with the collective resilience needed to respond to emergencies. Each consortium serves as a catalyst for continual quality improvement, shared purpose and sustained excellence.

*“Our partnerships are stronger collectively. We all have expanded capacity and can offer shared services. We save money by combining efforts. We all have improved access to specialized services, without each state offering everything. We can cover a larger footprint when [regional] states work together, acknowledging each other’s strengths and relying on similar demographics for long-term planning.”*

— Northern Plains Consortium Member

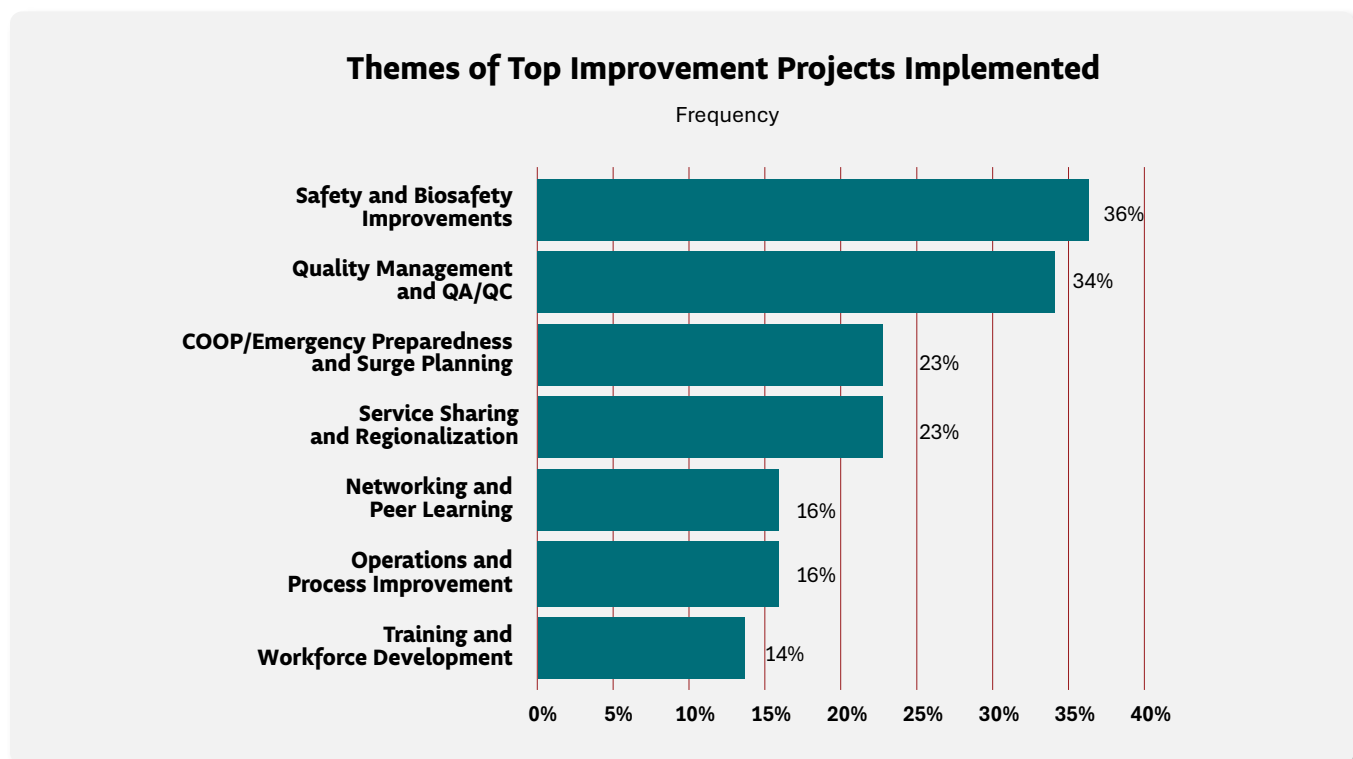


Figure 3. Findings from the 2026 Regional Consortia Impact Survey, N=61.

## Continuing and Sustaining the Success of the Regional Consortia

The Regional Consortia are a pivotal part of public health laboratories' core functions and sustainability. Both testimonials from laboratory leaders and evaluation data show that the Regional Consortia helps improve the quality, safety, reach and effectiveness of public health laboratories. Regional Consortia also contribute to the success of new laboratory leaders.

**The available evidence<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> indicates that the Regional Consortia have become a critical component of the public health laboratory support infrastructure**, enabling laboratories to adopt a more effective approach, including shared learning and regional problem-solving, that would be difficult to sustain through isolated efforts. **To continue the momentum and protect the proven progress achieved by the Regional Consortia, stable, sustained funding is critical.** Without it, the program's proven benefits risk diminishing over time, and public health laboratories may lose access to critical infrastructure that has contributed to their success.

## Using Evidence to Strengthen and Improve the Regional Consortia

Findings from this impact assessment inform APHL's ongoing continuous quality improvement approach for the Regional Consortia program. Participant feedback, insights and laboratory leadership perspectives are routinely used to refine programming and support structures. This iterative learning approach helps ensure that the Regional Consortia remains responsive to evolving laboratory needs.

# The Critical Infrastructure That Has Built a Lasting Impact

These partnerships and collaborations, supported by the US Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and APHL, have enabled the Regional Consortia to offer participant laboratories access to highly effective opportunities and critical infrastructure.

- ✓ **Innovation Grants and Quality Improvement Funding** — From 2017 to 2019, APHL distributed eight innovation grants across five Regional Consortia. These annual mini-grants supported participating consortia in achieving measurable improvements aligned with their unique priorities. They also served as a catalyst for modernizing regional laboratory systems and enhancing public health services nationwide. Similarly, quality improvement funding was available to the Regional Consortia from 2020 to 2024, in which eight additional projects were funded across all seven Regional Consortia. Examples of projects from both grants include piloting a web portal for tuberculosis testing, revising COOPs (continuity of operations plans), designing and implementing a compensation study, conducting a training needs assessment, sponsoring quality manager exchange trips, performing audits and hosting specialized workshops, among others.
- ✓ **Peer-to-peer Learning Program** — A hands-on, inter-laboratory learning program that offers APHL and CDC-funded travel scholarships for laboratory professionals to visit another laboratory. These visits support professional development through direct observation, skill-building and knowledge exchange. The Peer-to-peer program has supported 48 public health laboratory professionals, 24 participating laboratories and 27 host laboratories across 29 states. The program covers a wide range of topics and is flexible to meet the individual needs of each laboratory. The most common topics promoted quality, safety and preparedness improvements; testing service enhancements; and operational and support improvements.
- ✓ **Tabletop Exercises and Scenario Planning** — Public health laboratories play a critical role in public health during emergencies and unforeseen situations. As such, public health laboratories must have a COOP in place. Participants in the Regional Consortia can participate in tabletop exercise sessions to assess the coordination and communication of their COOPs across their consortium. These tabletop exercises help uncover gaps and ensure that laboratories can respond quickly and effectively, making them invaluable learning experiences.<sup>4,5</sup>
- ✓ **Subject Matter Expert Coordination** — APHL and CDC fund a subject matter expert (SME) consultant to help coordinate across the consortia. This SME coordination helps ensure efficiency and effectiveness in each consortium's goals and projects by leveraging expert knowledge. Additionally, as consortia members are mostly laboratory leaders with competing priorities, having a dedicated coordinator is essential to sustaining the quality and momentum of the Regional Consortia.
- ✓ **In-person Meetings** — Funding from APHL and CDC enables Regional Consortia participants to travel to regularly scheduled in-person meetings. Findings from the 2017 interviews, the 2025 focus groups and the 2026 evaluation survey demonstrate that face-to-face meetings are essential for building the strong relationships that drive the effectiveness and overall success of the Regional Consortia.

# How This Impact Was Assessed

This impact report was systemically assessed and produced by the APHL Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) team. The report evaluates the key outcomes and impacts of the Regional Consortia using a mixed-method approach. The findings are informed by multiple sources, including program records (e.g., existing program surveys, reports, stories of change and publications), two focus groups with consortium members, key informant interviews with subject-matter expert(s) and APHL staff and an evaluation survey distributed to all regional consortia participants. Focus groups, interviews, survey results and program records were analyzed to understand outcomes and common themes related to the benefits of the Regional Consortia.

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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, biological and chemical agents, genetic disorders in newborns and other health threats.

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