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Boosting Public Health Workers' Perceived Relatedness to Patients: A mixed-methods, pre-post study



Introduction: Maintaining a vibrant public health workforce is imperative to improving population health; however, it has remained difficult over the last decade due to understaffing, underfunding, and growing public mistrust. The Tennessee Department of Health (TDH) has been no exception and is managerially prioritizing social relatedness between its workforce and population base to promote retention.

Methods: Guided by Self-determination Theory, this practicum evaluated one intervention nurturing perceived social relatedness to patients by employees – an element tied to retention and workforce satisfaction. The intervention consisted of reports sent to 247 local-level TDH employees containing positive patient feedback pulled from nearly 2,000 pre-existent, but publicly inaccessible, patient satisfaction surveys. Employees received pre- and post-report surveys measuring relatedness to patients quantitatively and qualitatively. Paired t-tests assessed quantitative data, and Grounded Theory elucidated qualitative findings.

Results: 138 employees replied to the pre-survey, and 34 of those employees responded to the post-survey. Paired t-tests revealed no significant change in relatedness. Despite lack of statistical significance, 79.4% of employees wished to receive the report in future, and 73.5% of employees felt appreciated by patients after receiving the report. Qualitative findings showed positive patient feedback was highly valued and improved social relatedness towards patients.

Conclusions: While future improvement on quantitative results should be sought, this study qualitatively supports managerially centering patient feedback into public health workforce retention efforts. Future investments would include multi-modal garnering of patient feedback, establishing patient feedback dispersal practices for quality improvement, and creating employee evaluations and rewards based on such feedback.