

A National PHLI Story: Susan Allan, JD, MD, MPH

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Dr. Susan Allan is the Public Health Director for the Oregon Department of Human Services. Previously, Allan worked for 17 years as Director of the Arlington, Virginia County Health Department.

Being Treated Like We Matter. While not attributing all of her actions or achievements to PHLI, Allan cited many examples of both immediate and long term benefits.

I enjoyed it immensely. You know, we were treated like we mattered, and in public health practice, you are not often treated like you matter. That by itself was something, like we were actually doing something important and something that people wanted to support and develop. That was exciting by itself.

Building a Network. Allan spoke extensively about the network that she was able to build through PHLI, citing the value of getting to know prominent leaders in the field as well as “clusters of peers or colleagues that were doing the same thing I was, but it wasn’t [exactly] the same thing.” She also spoke to the value of getting to know people both inside and outside of governmental public health.

At the time...the immediate knowledge and sense of the world just opening up was really powerful...it opened up to other states; it opened up to people who were doing state level work in a different way from what I saw in my own state as a local leader. There were people who were in academics...people who were influencing policy...So I had direct contact with much more of the range of what the field of public health could offer.

Systems Thinking.

The most vivid learning was Peter Senge and systems thinking. It was sort of like when I learned epidemiology, and it was like, ‘Of course, this is so obvious and so right,’ and I had the same sense with this...and in a way it gave me a new vocabulary to explain things that had always troubled me, because I had never liked a lot of the way problem-solving and systems development was done because it was piecemeal rather than a bigger connected strategy. So that was one [part] that gave me a lot of confidence in trusting my own instincts, actually, trusting what I saw and believed that was different than other people and that there actually was some merit to the way I saw and believed it. And that because I saw it differently than they did, that I needed to say that rather than be cautious about it.

A National PHLI Story: Susan Allan, JD, MD, MPH (continued)

Serving the Wider Field. Allan has served on NACCHO committees, several key IOM committees, and as the APHA appointee to the Council on Education for Public Health. “I ended up with an opportunity to do things much bigger than my county work.” As she tried to describe the connection of this work with PHLI, Allan said, “I know it increased my bravery to take some risks. I think partly it increased my sense of the excitement and value of getting into policy positions or advisory roles...” She explained further:

Having the opportunity to get a little closer to people who were stars [in public health] and then also the sense of investment in policy and leadership that was part of the curriculum, I had both a sense of ‘well, somebody made a vote that I might be able to do this,’ and ‘I took up the slot, so I owe it to the field to try.’ So those first couple of ventures out actually were more, kind of cautious and tentative, even though they seemed like really big bold moves at the time, and it was a sense of progression from what I had done at the leadership institute.

Developing Others. Finally, Allan discussed how the principles of PHLI have influenced her input as a member of the Council on Education for Public Health.

...I think a lot about public health education. Even though it’s not my job, I think about it a lot... I think in terms of training leaders and managers and training for policy and non-academic ways of training and coaching. I gave that more conscious thought, in part, because of my experience there [at PHLI], and I have actually put a lot of professional time into trying to develop ways to continue education for public health professionals, to find ways to provide skills to people who are working in the field and who kind of stumbled into it through a side door, so it’s my experience there [with PHLI] that is a key part in my commitment to and involvement with the training of the public health field.