

A National PHLI Story: Patrick Libbey

Executive Director

National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO)



Patrick Libbey served as the Director for the Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Department in Washington State for the first 23 years of his public health career. About four and a half years ago, he became the Executive Director of NACCHO. In 1994, mid-way through his tenure in Thurston County, Libbey attended the Public Health Leadership Institute (PHLI)

In our recent interview, Libbey reflected on why he became interested in participating in PHLI.

It was early on in the PHLI experience. It was at a time we were doing some work in Washington State that was opening my eyes to a broader national picture of public health, so [PHLI] became attractive in that sense. It was an opportunity for me to see public health more broadly than the work I was doing in Thurston County uniquely, or Washington State...

Following the 1988 Institute of Medicine Report [The Future of Public Health], we were developing Washington State's approach to a Public Health Improvement Plan... [PHLI] opened my eyes as an opportunity to increase that network and see [our work] put in broader context than the straight operational perspective.

Libbey is reluctant to attribute all changes in his leadership to PHLI, but describes some of its effects:

The better it [leadership development] works, the harder it is to draw a single direct causal relationship. There are multiple influences. I am proud of the work we were doing in Washington State at that time, the Public Health Improvement Plan...it was one of the first states to look at performance measures. I had two [PHLI] classmates from Washington at that time... I think [PHLI] had an influence on the work we were doing in Washington State and then that work, in turn, has influenced work I've done on a National level....

For me, it was the combination of national exposure, and the immediate development of a network...we still have large points of connection within my own [PHLI] class, and then the PHLI experience created a collegial sense across [PHLI classes]. It has reinforced a national informal network that influenced the national leadership in public health at the state and local levels, and federal level... The role PHLI played for me was linking the work that we were doing in a local or a state sense to a larger national picture and a broader context within which I was working. That's probably the biggest key of it.

On a personal level, it was very reinforcing... I think it reinforced, or provided, greater confidence [for me] to follow what heretofore had been an 'instinctive approach' It gave me a framework for how [the way that] I want to work at a community level is reinforced and supported within a more disciplined approach of public health. It influenced my engagement in NACCHO, in becoming an officer and being active in that, and in combination with that, in a number of national projects and advisory boards.