



THE SHO-CASE STUDY

STATE HEALTH OFFICIALS
CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY EVALUATION

WORKING WITH STATE AND TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS

A POCKET GUIDE FOR GOVERNORS
AND THEIR SENIOR STAFF MEMBERS
AND TRANSITION TEAMS

This guide is based on the collective insights from 147 current and former state and territorial health officials and commissioners (referred to collectively as SHOs).



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The Role of State Health Officials

The SHO plays a critical role in protecting and ensuring the health of the state and its citizens. They lead health agencies that:

- Protect the public from health threats
- Promote the health and wellness of the state/territory
- Prevent disease and illness at the community level

Filling the role quickly – and with the right person – is particularly important since the SHO also leads the response to health emergencies related to natural disasters, disease outbreaks, and bio and chemical terrorism.

This guide serves as a resource and quick reference for governors, in particular for new governors and their chiefs of staff transition teams.

This information can help advance the governor's health priorities and inform ways to work with state public health leaders. Key points to consider in selecting individuals for SHO positions are included.



Preparing for Public Health Emergencies

As the head of the state, governors have the legal authority to declare a state of emergency, including events that affect health. The person you appoint to lead public health is critical because the moment you take office you face the risk of health emergencies, whether they are man-made (e.g., terrorism) or natural (e.g, hurricanes).

Well-planned emergency simulations and table-top exercises are important tests of preparedness for emergencies. However, the best preparation includes having public health leaders who are knowledgeable of incident command and can lead and support the response with knowledge of highly complex areas such as the health effects of natural disasters, bio/chemical terrorism, and infectious disease outbreaks.



Preparing for Public Health Emergencies



State health officers (SHOs) provide governors with crucial information about potential health emergencies and the relevant context for actions that are necessary to ensure the protection of the population's health.



SHOs must have a strong working relationship with State Emergency Management and State Homeland Security Agencies.



Establishing a clear understanding of the state laws governing public health emergencies and the roles the governor and the SHO are responsible for is critical to the success of the response.



Communication Between the Governor and the SHO

Current and former SHOs cited communication as the key to building an effective relationship with the governor. The following tools and information facilitate healthy communication.

- Clarity about the governor's health priorities and immediate expectations for the SHO.
- Shared definitions and processes for informing the governor of major health-related problems and urgent and emerging health issues.
- Clarity about the roles and relationships with the governor's office and policy advisors.
- Defined procedures for regular meetings and briefings with the governor and chief of staff.
- Regular meetings with the governor's cabinet or health cabinet members.

SHOs said that having a direct connection to the governor was crucial to their ability to do their job effectively.

Considerations for Selecting a SHO

Essential Prior Experiences and Professional Qualifications



The following prior experiences and professional qualifications were most valuable to SHOs in their roles:

1. Organizational leadership and managerial experience, especially in a large, complex organization
2. Prior governmental public health practice experience at any level (federal, state, local)
3. Credentials including professional degrees and training

Personal attributes most critical to SHO performance



1. Ability to quickly establish trust relationships with agency staff
2. Integrity
3. Ability to remain calm and confident in the midst of challenge
4. Ability to establish effective working relationships with other government agencies and outside partners

Most states have laws that govern the required educational backgrounds and/or experience of who can be appointed as a SHO.

Considerations for Selecting a SHO

Personal skills most critical to SHO success



1. Leadership skills such as setting a vision and being a strategic thinker
2. Communication skills
3. Organizational management skills
4. Systems thinking
5. Political acumen - knowledge, skills, and abilities

Currently, state health officer (SHO) tenures are at an all-time low. This presents a number of leadership challenges for identifying and setting critical public health goals and sustaining credible and consistent agency effort necessary to protect public health.

SHOs have historically come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines:



Have previous governmental public health experience



Hold medical degrees



Hold public health degrees



Have both a medical degree and a public health degree

Ability to establish trusted relationships with outside partners and the governor's office were both associated with longer tenures among former SHOs



Urgent Essentials for Governors and their SHOs



**Clarity on the governor's vision
for the state's health**



**A list of the governor's initial
top health priorities**



**A clear set of behavioral expectations of the
SHO in relationship to the governor**

**SHOs felt that having a direct connection to the
governor was crucial to doing their jobs effectively.**