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Policy

Brief



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COUNCIL OF STATE AND
TERRITORIAL EPIDEMIOLOGISTS

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Statement of the Problem and Policy Proposal

The “State or Territorial Epidemiologist” (SE) is a critical, multi-faceted role within health departments; despite this, the role has been deprioritized in jurisdictions when funding levels wane. There is presently no single job description for the role of a SE in state and territorial health departments. This policy brief outlines the important functions and role of a SE and provides recommendations to state, territorial, and federal policymakers on how a SE function in each state or territory can best be supported to strengthen the public health system. The information contained in this policy brief can also be used to educate the public and external partners (e.g., legislators) about the important work of applied epidemiology that occurs in state and territorial health departments, which is often led by SEs. State and territorial health department leadership should use the Council of Territorial Epidemiologists’ (CSTE) description of a SE to define the key role and functions of a SE in their respective jurisdiction.

The Role of the State or Territorial Epidemiologist (SE)

A SE is a scientific and public health expert within a state or territorial health department who serves some of the critical functions outlined below, although exact responsibilities may vary by jurisdiction.

- Serves as the primary point of contact for communicating and coordinating with federal entities, other jurisdictions, and the public on matters pertaining to epidemiologic practice, public health investigations, and other public health issues.
- Serves on the governing Council for the CSTE. This Council establishes which diseases are nationally notifiable, establishes standardized surveillance case definitions, and critically reviews and approves position and policy statements for conditions and issues of national public health importance.
- Provides leadership for communicable and/or non-communicable disease detection and monitoring to inform public health response activities.
- Develops and refines plans and strategies to prevent and respond to population health threats, including emerging issues such as bioterrorism, pandemics, or environmental disasters.
- Advises policymakers on strategies for preventing and controlling diseases and associated risk factors in different populations.
- Informs the public, healthcare providers, and other partners about diseases and outbreaks, and provides recommendations to prevent and control diseases and address health threats in communities.
- Provides leadership for the health department on the management of data for internal and external use (including policy development around data collection and data sharing with the public and partners for public health purposes).
- Mentors and supervises epidemiology staff and trainees.

Recommended Actions

1. State and territorial health departments should formally designate a SE as an essential role or formal position. It should preferably not be politically appointed to ensure longevity and sustained expertise in the SE role. Jurisdictions may implement this role differently based on their needs and structure (e.g., as a titled position within their health department or having more than one SE).

2. State and territorial health departments should identify stable and consistent funding for a SE in their jurisdictions to ensure continuity of operations and epidemiology leadership.
3. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) should allow funding for SE positions through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity (ELC) cooperative agreement, the Public Health Infrastructure Grant (PHIG), and other available federal funding sources.
4. CDC should maintain funding for training epidemiologists at all levels as a pipeline for senior and leadership epidemiology roles to fill and/or support the functions of an SE. Examples of these programs include CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service (EIS) and the CSTE Applied Epidemiology Fellowship (AEF).
5. State and federal leadership should communicate with SEs (see the [CSTE list of SEs](#)) as a primary point of contact for public health, epidemiology, and outbreak-related or other public health emergency issues requiring inter-agency coordination. Engaging SEs is important to understand the impact of and to help support and inform federal policy affecting state, Tribal, local, or territorial jurisdictions.

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The authors of this brief are members of the State Epidemiology Function Workgroup, which was formally established by the CSTE Executive Board in 2025 to develop materials that articulate the value of the State or Territorial Epidemiologist function in state and territorial health departments.

Dr. James McDonald, Commissioner, New York State Department of Health

As Commissioner of one of the largest health departments in the country, I rely heavily on the expertise of our State Epidemiologist. The work of our epidemiology team provides science-based intelligence and surveillance data that informs the high-level decisions I need to make to ensure the health and well-being of New Yorkers.

From our weekly infectious disease calls updating me on emerging trends or threats to urgent memos alerting me to critical events, their biggest role is sounding the alarm and letting me know what needs to be done. During flu season, for example, our New York State Department of Health Respiratory Surveillance Report provides weekly updates regarding the spread of respiratory illnesses (flu, COVID and RSV). This includes data on confirmed cases and hospitalizations broken down by age and region, so we know where to target our resources.

What does our State Epidemiologist and the epidemiology team do? They help to navigate this ship; without the precise and timely information they provide, we would be steering without a map. (Submitted 2/23/26)

Alvin Shultz, Chief of CDC's Epidemiology, Laboratory Capacity, and Informatics Branch

State and Territorial Epidemiologists are the frontline leaders of infectious disease prevention and response across the country. Through the Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity for Infectious Diseases (ELC) Cooperative Agreement, we partner daily with these seasoned professionals to drive federally-funded initiatives targeting emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases — and when outbreaks strike, their expertise becomes indispensable. (Submitted 2/26/26)

Dr. Allison Arwady, Director of CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

State and Territorial Epidemiologists are the strategic backbone of public health. They transform raw data into actionable intelligence to identify and mitigate health threats within their communities. CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control works with state and territorial epidemiologists to ensure injury, overdose, and violence data is available to inform rapid response, evidence-based prevention strategies, and intervention evaluation. (Submitted 4/22/26)