



# Commissioned Corps BULLETIN

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## Surgeon General's Column

This is a significant time for the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) and its Commissioned Corps. As you are no doubt aware, this year marks the bicentennial of the establishment of the PHS in Philadelphia in July 1798.

The PHS grew out of a need for healthy sailors during the infancy of our country. It was a time when we relied heavily upon the sea for trade and for security. Therefore, when seamen became sick away from home and family and could not find adequate health care, it posed a problem that affected the Nation. The solution—the founding of the U.S. Marine Hospital Service—was an early instance of our Government realizing that there is a national interest in identifying and addressing the health concerns of populations at greatest risk.

The PHS has since grown from a loose confederation of marine hospitals to a cadre of 50,000 employees, including the 6,000 members of the Commissioned Corps who work in our eight Operating Divisions. However, the principle driving the PHS remains the same—the Nation benefits by protecting the health of those at greatest risk. While only a few months have transpired in my tenure as Assistant Secretary for Health and Surgeon General, I already have seen for myself the value of the PHS Commissioned Corps as a Uniformed Service and as a unique resource for the Federal Government in carrying out this mission.

PHS officers occupy strategic leadership roles throughout the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and in many other Federal agencies. Within HHS, 42 percent of PHS officers have supervisory responsibilities versus

19 percent of the civil service employees, and a composite of 23 percent of our officers are assigned to billets that are rated higher than their pay grades. In addition, of course, PHS officers hold many major positions in other Federal agencies as exemplified by the Chief Medical Officers of the Coast Guard and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

During the many briefings and conferences that I have attended in the last few months, I have also been impressed by the breadth of work experiences of PHS officers. Mobility is a tenet of a Uniformed Service, and most officers have served in more than one Operating Division or program during their careers. Such mobility fosters a better understanding of the complexities and interrelationships of public health problems and issues. It also permits officers to work more easily and effectively with their counterparts all across the Department.

While the decentralization of authority within HHS during the past several years has had its advantages, it also has had the potential to lead some people to see problems only from the perspective of their Operating Division or program. The wide-ranging experience of PHS officers acts as a counterweight to this type of limited view. That is why I want to make certain that our officers gain experience through a variety of geographic and programmatic assignments as their careers progress, so that upon assumption of leadership positions they will have the comprehensive perspective that is mandated by the complexity of today's public health issues.

Another challenge we face is the irrefutable fact that the Corps is growing more senior. Overall, about 1,400 officers representing 24 percent of our active-duty strength are eligible for retirement. In some categories, such as the engineer category, the percentage is much higher. As our senior officers retire, we must be certain that junior officers have the requisite experience to assume leadership positions. We also must make certain that our recruitment programs for new officers are efficacious. With this in mind, I have asked our Chief Professional Officers and Professional Advisory Committees to examine the current status within each professional category and to develop recommendations to enhance our recruitment and career development activities.

By now many of you have participated in one or more events to honor the PHS upon the occasion of its bicentennial. I had a very memorable visit to Boston, Massachusetts, on April 7 to participate in a bicentennial ceremony that is described elsewhere in this edition of the *Commissioned Corps Bulletin*. I also look forward with much anticipation to the gala celebration in Philadelphia on July 3 to commemorate President Adams' signing in 1798 in that city of an Act "for the relief of sick and disabled seamen."

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