

USPHS Commissioned Corps Framework

United in Action, Forward in
Purpose



U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Framework: United in Action, Forward in Purpose

Purpose

The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps Operational Framework (Framework) is a structured roadmap that aligns five priority goal areas and tactical actions to address critical areas of improvement. It reflects input from numerous internal and external stakeholders and includes tactical action items that will contribute to the successful accomplishment of the priority goal areas. The Framework plan is designed to be self-contained and can be implemented as presented or used to initiate a more comprehensive and longer-ranging strategic planning process.

Background

The USPHS Commissioned Corps was established as a uniformed service on January 4, 1889, when President Grover Cleveland signed the Act to Regulate Appointments in the Marine Hospital Service of the United States. This creation of the USPHS Commissioned Corps grew from its roots within the U.S. Marine Hospital Service more than 90 years earlier, protecting against the spread of disease into the United States from sailors returning from abroad. Since that inception, the USPHS Commissioned Corps has expanded to work with nine Federal departments and 38 Federal agencies through its current force of over 5,400 officers located in more than 800 duty stations in the United States and around the world. As one of America's eight uniformed services, the USPHS Commissioned Corps fills essential public health leadership and service roles within Federal agencies and programs, including the Indian Health Service, Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Bureau of Prisons, and Department of Homeland Security. The administration and leadership of the USPHS Commissioned Corps is under the Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and stations Public Health Service officers across the U.S. government. Within HHS, the Secretary has delegated authority to the Assistant Secretary for Health (ASH) to lead the USPHS Commissioned Corps, with strategic oversight by the Surgeon General (SG) and the Deputy Surgeon General (DSG). Its operations, including all policies, regulations, and human resource functions, are executed by Commissioned Corps Headquarters (CCHQ).

As outlined in “The U.S. Public Health Service Corps Doctrine¹,” the vision of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps is to be “the Nation’s preeminent public health asset called upon to solve public health challenges and address daily and emergent public health needs, throughout the United States and globally.” Through its leadership and operational structure

¹ “U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps Doctrine,” Commissioned Corps Management Information System, accessed October 20, 2023.

https://dcp.psc.gov/ccmis/PDF_docs/USPHS%20Commissioned%20Corps%20Doctrine.pdf.

within HHS, coupled with duty assignments across the federal government and deployments in response to health threats, the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its officers strive to achieve its mission “to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of our Nation.”

Public Health Service officers contribute daily to achieving this mission through their primary assignments and through temporary duty assignments, deployments, and details. Officer roles include providing essential healthcare services to underserved and at-risk populations; applying their expertise to lead critical public health programs and develop policies; advancing innovation and science; and deploying to respond to public health emergencies².

Rationale

Over time, the USPHS Commissioned Corps has evolved as a uniformed service, actively identifying operational gaps and threats that could impede optimal functioning. The Framework incorporates progress made through the Modernization Initiative and the work made across all categories as well as Surgeon General Chartered Groups.

Since then, there have been significant global events including the COVID-19 pandemic, a worsening climate crisis, and economic downturn, which continue to impact nations, communities, organizations, and individuals around the globe, including the USPHS Commissioned Corps, its officers, and the departments and agencies in which they serve.

In navigating today’s world and accomplishing its mission, USPHS Commissioned Corps leadership have identified and communicated their priority areas for the service. Guided strategically and directed by the DSG, these priorities form the foundation for five priority goal areas, which will help ensure the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its officers are well equipped to fulfill their mission. This Framework is an operational roadmap which aligns priority actions of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and the departments and agencies in which it serves with each objective to ultimately lead to their successful accomplishment. It includes tangible tactical actions and timelines which will aid continuous monitoring and evaluation. This, in turn, will enable the USPHS Commissioned Corps to track its progress and make data-driven decisions. Importantly, it will also facilitate transparency and enhance shared responsibility and accountability in the implementation process.

The Framework extends beyond a list of actions solely for Commissioned Corps Headquarters (CCHQ); rather, it encompasses the entirety of the USPHS Commissioned Corps. While CCHQ clearly has a role to play across the tactical actions, achieving success in implementing the Framework also necessitates extensive collaborative contributions. This includes actions within HHS to address crucial needs such as functional and integrated information systems, legislative priorities, financial support, and best practices in human resources. Coordination with agencies within HHS and with external departments where officers are assigned is vital to optimize the

² “About the USPHS Commissioned Corps Media Kit,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, accessed October 20, 2023. <https://www.usphs.gov/media-center>.

use of officers while ensuring their specific needs are supported within the broader workforce. In addition, officers themselves play a pivotal role in the Framework's success, from formal roles leading specific tactical actions to ensuring active participation in engagement activities.

Development Process

The Framework serves as a dynamic tool tailored for short-term and near-term actions, with a horizon spanning the next two years. It was compiled from recommendations received from across the USPHS Commissioned Corps, and it was developed within a relatively condensed timeframe to facilitate prompt and effective implementation. As previously noted, this Framework is not intended as a comprehensive strategic plan; however, it will lay the groundwork for a future, more extensive strategic planning process. The coordinated approach is anticipated to involve in-depth data collection, rigorous qualitative and quantitative analyses, and thorough reviews encompassing tactical, operational, and legislative perspectives. The ultimate goal is to guide the USPHS Commissioned Corps not only in the immediate future but also to inform a more extensive and forward-looking visioning for sustained success.

The process of gathering recommendations and input involved active engagement of stakeholders representing various viewpoints from across the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its partner departments and agencies. This approach sought to encompass a comprehensive understanding of perspectives, needs, and potential challenges. Recommendations were requested from several stakeholders. Senior leadership from CCHQ, the Assistant Surgeons General Leadership Council, the Chief Professional Officers Board, and Commissioned Corps Liaisons on behalf of their departments and agencies provided input. In addition, recommendations from the following Chartered Advisory Groups were requested to capture their specific viewpoints: Commissioned Corps Women's Issues Advisory Board; Junior Officer Advisory Group; Minority Officers Liaison Council including the four Chartered Minority Advisory Groups (American Indian/Alaska Native Commissioned Officers Advisory Committee, Asian Pacific American Officers Committee, Black Commissioned Officers Advisory Group, Hispanic Officers Advisory Committee); and Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity Advisory Group. In addition, the HHS Human Resources Directors were provided with a briefing to alert them to this process, and Commissioned Corps Liaisons from non-HHS agencies were offered a briefing if needed for their senior leadership.

Based on their perspectives and knowledge of the strengths of and challenges facing the USPHS Commissioned Corps, these stakeholder representatives provided feedback on the five priority areas. They were requested to provide recommendations for tactical actions and associated timeframes; potential entities responsible for the actions; as well as identify operational gaps which may impede the recommended tactical actions; and suggest mitigation efforts to ensure progress despite gaps. In addition, they were asked to provide their recommendations concerning crucial factors to articulate regarding the priority areas, including any proposed language additions or revisions to the priority areas.

The recommendations received from across the stakeholders were compiled and reviewed for similar themes as well as for potentially conflicting recommendations. Within each priority area, similarly themed tactical actions were grouped and consolidated. Tactical actions which are applicable to more than one objective were moved, if needed, to the provide greater alignment.

Priority Areas and Tactical Actions

Outlined below are each of the five priority areas objectives and their associated tactical actions. While the stakeholder recommendation process did not explicitly involve prioritizing the priority areas, certain feedback from stakeholders did include prioritization and the order presented here reflects that input. It is recognized that future strategic planning discussions may yield more robust input on priority areas for the USPHS Commissioned Corps, allowing for consensus on their prioritization.

Resource gaps that could impede the implementation of the tactical actions were almost universally acknowledged in stakeholder input. The most commonly identified gaps with associated risks were in financial resources, human resources, and information systems. Stakeholders consistently highlighted challenges arising from the absence of dedicated funding for both routine force management and emergent needs. In addition, significant concerns were raised about the reliance on outdated and siloed information systems, which pose a significant hindrance to effective operations, impacting not only officers but also the departments and agencies in which they are stationed. The USPHS Commissioned Corps must rely upon the essential engagement of others in tackling these cross-cutting issues. Addressing these resource gaps directly will require this active participation by these other offices, coupled with implementing initial mitigation strategies. This will be crucial to ensure the successful execution of planned tactical actions.

Priority Area 1: Enhance and Support the Well-being of Officers

Prioritizing the well-being of officers has always been important and is especially critical in the current post-pandemic environment. Through this priority area, the USPHS Commissioned Corps seeks to foster a culture that places a premium on the physical, psychological, and emotional health and well-being of its officers. Doing so is integral to ensuring the overall productivity and resilience of the USPHS Commissioned Corps. In addition, a dedicated focus on well-being will contribute to reduced stress, enhanced job satisfaction, and improved morale, creating an environment where officers feel supported, motivated, and better equipped to address the evolving demands of their critical roles.

Priority Area 2: Enhance and Support Officers' Career Life-Cycle

Supporting the full life-cycle of an officer's career, from recruitment and throughout their career is essential for fostering a thriving and sustainable USPHS Commissioned Corps. Beginning with recruitment, providing comprehensive support ensures the attraction and retention of top

talent, laying the foundation for success of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and the departments and agencies in which officers serve. As officers progress in their careers, ongoing support contributes to professional development, job satisfaction, and overall well-being, fostering a positive work culture. Training, mentorship, and advancement opportunities enhance individual growth and contribute to improved capacities to achieve Commissioned Corps, department, and agency missions. Supporting officers through various career stages promotes esprit de corps and can facilitate retention of officers, thus reducing separation rates. As officers approach retirement or choose separation, a well-structured support system ensures a smooth transition, acknowledges their contributions, and upholds the USPHS Commissioned Corps commitment to its workforce. Supporting the entire career lifecycle is not just a means of attracting talent but also a strategic investment in organizational resilience, employee satisfaction, and sustained success of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and of the departments and agencies in which officers serve.

Priority Area 3: Ensure the USPHS Commissioned Corps is a Ready and Deployable Uniformed Service Prepared At All Times to Meet Urgent and Emergent Public Health Needs

In times of crises, such as pandemics, disasters, and public health emergencies, a rapid and effective response is critical to safeguarding the well-being of the United States and the world. Attaining this objective leverages the uniqueness of the USPHS Commissioned Corps—the mobility of a uniformed service coupled with the breadth and depth of a force solely dedicated to public health. By ensuring the USPHS Commissioned Corps’ abilities to operationally support, equip, monitor needs, and maintain a highly trained and prepared cadre of public health professionals, the nation will be better prepared against emerging health threats, minimize the impact of public health crises, and rapidly mitigate existing and new risks domestically and globally.

Priority Area 4: Develop and Strengthen Meaningful Processes and Systems Needed to Support the USPHS Commissioned Corps, its Officers, and the Departments and Agencies in Which They Serve

This priority area encompasses the robust systems, policies and processes which address evolving issues within the USPHS Commissioned Corps and span matters that range from National health priorities to force management and individualized officer needs. Meaningful processes and systems contribute to enhanced coordination, transparency, and timely, data-driven decision-making. Strengthening these processes and systems supports the internal workings of the USPHS, departments, and agencies at which these officers serve, and reinforces their capacities to address complex health challenges, ultimately benefiting the health and safety of the nation.

Priority Area 5: Ensure Visibility of the USPHS Commissioned Corps with the American Public, Communities, and Partners Domestic and Abroad

Transitioning from the *Invisible Corps*³ to a visible Corps requires a concerted effort to elevate visibility and public awareness. Through strategic communication, community engagement, and proactive outreach, the priority area is to help transform the USPHS Commissioned Corps into a visible force, recognized and appreciated for its crucial contributions to public health both nationally and globally. By prioritizing visibility, the USPHS Commissioned Corps seeks to not only enhance public trust and confidence but also to facilitate collaboration with non-federal partners, ensuring collective and coordinated responses to global health challenges both now and in the future. Enhancing visibility of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its officers will also benefit departments and agencies at which these officers serve, as it will provide additional platforms for highlighting the alignment of missions and the shared successes. Expanded visibility will also contribute to other objectives in this Framework, as heightened awareness in the public can elevate the USPHS Commissioned Corps as a career pathway for up-and-coming public health professionals.

Implementation

This Framework serves as an operational roadmap for the USPHS Commissioned Corps, its officers, departments, and agencies at which these officers serve, outlining a path towards greater effectiveness, responsiveness, and impact of the USPHS Commissioned Corps in fulfilling its mission to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of the nation. The implementation of this Framework requires a systematic approach, involving continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress, identify challenges, and make data-driven adjustments. This routine review process involving stakeholder representatives will be led and coordinated out of the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General by the DSG. This approach will foster adaptability and enable real-time mitigation of implementation challenges.

The DSG will engage a select group of leaders from the Assistant Surgeons General Leadership Council, the Chief Professional Officers Board, and the recently re-established Surgeon General's Policy Advisory Council to advise on the highest priority actions for implementation. This group will assess actions already underway or planned and provide prioritization recommendations for the suggested new actions, adopting a phased implementation strategy. Certain recommendations which may not be immediately prioritized may be identified as "quick win" actions and will be led and implemented by specific stakeholders (e.g., chartered advisory groups, liaisons) through existing management structures. The finalized tables of recommended actions will be appended to this Framework for subsequent release.

More broadly, this Framework and its utilization will be communicated across the USPHS Commissioned Corps. Consistent communication anchored in ongoing progress updates will

³ "Invisible Corps: In Officio Salutis," PBS, accessed January 12, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/video/invisible-corps-5czrsw/>.

promote the acknowledgment of accomplishments and transparency in addressing challenges. Overall, successful implementation requires a collaborative, iterative, and well-coordinated approach that aligns the efforts of the USPHS Commissioned Corps and its officers with the objectives of the Framework.