BACKGROUND

• The U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Scientist Category was established in 1945 for doctoral-level officers with scientific training backgrounds.
• Approximately 130 doctoral-level psychologists currently serve in the USPHS across 16 Agencies and Departments.
• On July 1st, 2021, all active duty USPHS psychologists were integrated into the Scientist Category.

Figure 1: Agencies & Departments PHS Psychologists Serve, 2021

• The SciPAC Visibility Subcommittee collaborated with the Psychologist Integration Subcommittee in November-December 2021 to highlight the contribution of PHS psychologists to the Scientist Category.
• A survey was emailed to all 130 currently serving USPHS psychologist officers.
• The survey included questions on officer rank, agency, time in service, professional role, participation in deployments, and experience during the COVID-19 pandemic.
• Thirty-two psychologists responded to the survey for a response rate of 21%.

SPOTLIGHT ON SELECTED USPHS PSYCHOLOGISTS SERVING IN THE USPHS SCIENTIST CATEGORY

Scientist: CDR Wade Keckler
Position: Senior Mental Health Executive
Assignment: Naval Hospital Pensacola, U.S. Navy
Duty Station: Myrtle Grove, FL
Officer Highlights: CDR Keckler has served in USPHS for 9 years. In his role as Senior Mental Health Executive at the Naval Hospital Pensacola, his main responsibilities include providing direct mental health care and overseeing health services across 17 clinics with behavioral health officers in the US Southeast region. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as the senior leader for behavioral health services in the region, CDR Keckler set policies that strived to provide excellent and accessible patient care while providing maximum infection protection for his patients and staff. CDR Keckler showed great resilience in adapting his care as a mental health provider to various non-face-to-face patient care models.

Scientist: LCDR Nicholas Buhr
Position: Course Supervisor/Division Officer
Assignment: Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School
Duty Station: San Diego, CA
Officer Highlights: LCDR Buhr has served in USPHS for 4 years. As a Course Supervisor/Division Officer at the Navy Drug and Alcohol Counselor School, LCDR Buhr’s main responsibilities include the supervision of 28 instructors for 92 courses, 36 labs, and 6 exams each quarter. Throughout deployments that LCDR Buhr has led or supported, he utilized his counseling skills and engaged the deployed PHS officers and local health care providers in group or individual counseling with a focus on building resilience, managing high levels of distress or grief, and supporting mental well-being through crisis. Some of his deployments include: COVID-19 mission to March Air Reserve Base and Lackland Air Force Base quarantine sites as Public Information Officer and Case Manager; COVID-19 deployments to the Navajo Nation in Shiprock and Chinle as Mental Health Team Lead and Behavioral Health Process Protection; Operation Allies Welcome in Fort Dix as Officer in Charge of Federal Behavioral Health Response. At Fort Dix, LCDR Buhr utilized his counseling skills and engaged the deployed PHS officers and local health care providers in group or individual counseling with a focus on building resilience, managing high levels of distress or grief, and supporting mental well-being through crisis.

Figure 2: Discipline for Qualifying Degree, PHS Psychologists, 2021

METHODS

• The SciPAC Visibility Subcommittee collaborated with the Psychologist Integration Subcommittee in November-December 2021 to highlight the contribution of PHS psychologists to the Scientist Category.
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QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

• Survey respondents serve across 5 government departments and have rank from O-3 to O-6.
• Respondents have served in USPHS for 1-29 years (average=7 years).
• 91% of respondents serve in a supervisory billet or position and oversee 2-100 staff (median=15).
• 72% provide direct patient care as a part of work roles.
• 69% transitioned to the Scientist Category in 2021 from HSO.
• Respondents participated in 89 PHS deployments over 30 responses (average=2.8 per officer, range 0-10).
• Most common USPHS responses included COVID-19 (20 deployments), Hurricane Maria (12 deployments), and Unaccompanied Children/Minors (5 deployments).

OFFICER IMPACT AND CONCLUSIONS

• 100% of USPHS psychologist respondents reported that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their work environment.
• USPHS psychologists demonstrated great resilience during the pandemic in navigating institutional lockdowns, working longer hours, modifying clinical care settings, and increasing the use of telehealth technology.
• Through their leadership and commitment to excellence in public health, USPHS psychologists will continue to play vital roles in USPHS and support the mission of USPHS to protect, promote, and advance the health and safety of the nation.

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