



Doctoral Dissertation Defense Announcement

**“Resilience and Retention in the Rural Public Health Workforce  
During the COVID-19 Pandemic”**



**Marta McMillion**

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School of Graduate Studies

Medical College of Wisconsin

**Committee in Charge:**

David Nelson, PhD (Mentor)

Leslie Ruffalo, PhD

Michael Fraser, PhD

**Date:** Monday, March 25, 2024

**Time:** 3:30 PM (CST)

**Zoom:** <https://us06web.zoom.us/j/85767702474?pwd=Szban7vbcxsvl4iopCQWJfH0nFVbbV.1>

Meeting ID: 857 6770 2474

Passcode: 161142

**Graduate Studies:**

Research Theory (PUBH 28150)

Public Health Practice I: Building a Foundation (PUBH 282021)

Doctoral Seminar (PUBH28301)

Public Health Research Study and Design (PUBH28160)

Public Health Practice II: Building Community Partnerships and Coalitions (PUBH28202)

Introduction to Community Engagement (PUBH28106)

Data Collection and Analysis (PUBH28151)

Public Health Practice III: Strategies for Eliminating Health Disparities (PUBH28203)

Executive and Organizational Leadership (PUBH28152)

Doctoral Dissertation (PUBH28399)

Applied Practice Experience

## **Dissertation**

### **“Resilience and Retention in the Rural Public Health Workforce During the COVID-19 Pandemic”**

The COVID-19 pandemic imposed considerable stress and strain on the public health workforce, significantly in rural settings. Previous research has identified that resilience serves as an essential determinant of mental health and professional efficacy, playing a significant role in preventing burnout and facilitating recovery from stressful and traumatic events. Despite rural public health workers experiencing significant stress, previous research suggests that rural public health workers exhibited lower job attrition rates than their urban counterparts. This study aims to illuminate the unique experiences of resilience within the rural public health workforce amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for retention and job continuity.

Drawing inspiration from phenomenological methods, the research methods explored the lived experiences of 26 rural public health professionals in Wisconsin. The researcher recruited participants through a convenience sample of local health officers, supplemented by participant-assisted snowball sampling. The researcher interviewed participants in the fall and winter of 2023 via Zoom videoconferencing. Interviews followed a semi-structured approach, and the inquiry focused on resilience-supporting experiences during the pandemic, explicitly emphasizing organizational support and its effects on retention and job continuity. The researcher transcribed interviews and reviewed them to identify emerging themes among the participants.

Data analysis revealed five primary themes: personal characteristics, connection and support, work environment, personal coping, and empowered emotions, which are consistent with other research on resilience. Based on these themes, results indicated the interconnection between various resilience-supporting experiences, which can be interpreted through the lens of the Social-Ecological Model.

Due to the prevalence of resilience-supporting factors identified as part of key organizational experiences, the findings suggest the significance of organizational support. Specifically, there was a significant focus on organizational supports related to environmental dynamics and interpersonal relationships, such as positive relationships with team members and leadership, in shaping individual resilience experiences.

Ultimately, this research holds significance for local public health officials and decision-makers, who can influence organizational environments that support experiences of resilience for the rural public health workforce. The present study provides valuable insights to inform the development of tailored interventions to bolster resilience among rural public health workers. Such interventions have the potential to fortify the rural public health workforce, fostering their ability to effectively serve community health needs while ensuring workforce stability and effectiveness in addressing public health challenges.

**Marta McMillion, MPH, MS, CHES**

Curriculum Vitae  
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**EDUCATION**

INSTITUTION AND LOCATION	DEGREE	YEAR	FIELD OF STUDY
University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI	BS	2010	Dietetics
Nebraska Methodist College, Omaha, NE	MS	2012	Health Promotion Management
Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI	MPH	2017	Public Health
Medical College of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, WI	DrPH	2024	Public Health

**RELEVANT EMPLOYMENT**

**DIRECTOR, PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS AND PLANNING**

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)

May 2023 – Present  
Arlington, Virginia

**SENIOR ANALYST, PUBLIC HEALTH SYSTEMS AND PLANNING**

Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO)

August 2022 – May 2023  
Arlington, Virginia

**ASSISTANT PUBLIC HEALTH DIRECTOR & COMMUNITY HEALTH SPECIALIST**

Oneida County Health Department

December 2015 – August 2022  
Rhinelander, Wisconsin

**HEALTH COACHING MANAGER & HEALTH COACH**

Trotter Wellness

January 2012 – April 2014  
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

**CURRENT VOLUNTEER & COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

- Student Representative, Medical College of Wisconsin Graduate School Association
- Member, Medical College of Wisconsin Public Health Programs Advisory Committee
- Member, University of Wisconsin-Madison New to Public Health (N2PH) Residency Program Planning Committee
- Member, League of Women Voters of the Northwoods

**SELECTED PRESENTATIONS**

- Wisconsin Public Health Association (WPHA) Early Career Professionals Section Panel. "Journey into Public Health." September 12, 2023.
- Public Health Improvement Training. "Introduction to State and Community Health Assessments." June 5, 2023.
- Public Health Improvement Training. "Building a Shared Vision: Collaborative Strategic Planning in Action." June 5, 2023.
- Wisconsin Public Health Association/Wisconsin Association of Local Health Departments and Boards (WPHA/WALHDAB) Annual Public Health Conference. "Breaking the Silence: Actively Marketing Public Health." May 20, 2015.