

A Public Health Code of Ethics Template

We provide here a description of core values in public health, and a list of ten principles that incorporate the values and describe related actions and attitudes. Since naming justice as a value requires specification of the characteristics of that justice, the listed values describe what justice is to look like in public health. The ten principles are written as single word adjectives with accompanying explanations to make the list more memorable and to accommodate changes to the descriptions that creators of an actual code may prefer.

The guidance we provide here is informed by contemporary codes of ethics for public health and for disciplines within public health. The various disciplines have drawn from ethical schools of thought that best address particular concerns. Thus, there are elements of utilitarianism, duty, human rights, and care. There has been a growing appreciation of the insights of indigenous people, with attention to interdependence and the centrality of land and place, and injustices experienced by indigenous people. Thus, this guidance also incorporates elements of indigenous worldviews.

The intended audience of this guidance is institutions and professionals with a public health mission or mandate. This would include government ministries, agencies, and offices, as well as public-health-oriented non-governmental organizations. Since the work of institutions is carried out by individuals, the ethics in a code apply to individuals employed by the institution and the institution as a whole. Thus, not only is a public health professional to be trustworthy, for example, but the principle of trustworthiness should permeate the policies and practices of the institution.

Core values in public health

The **health** of any part of nature depends on the health of all other parts. Human health does not stand apart from nature but is integrated with it. To attend to human health, then, is to attend to a balance of nature that will remain for future generations. Human thriving is the ability to live in **harmony** with the rest of nature.

Public health policies and programs aim to **prevent** the occurrence of health-threatening conditions or events by addressing their **root causes**, including the social determinants.

Public health, as the name suggests, concerns itself with the health of a population. A population is more than a collection of individuals. Because humans are social, they form **communities**: people who depend on each other, support each other, do things together, and enjoy one another. Public health addresses the health of communities.

Although people sort themselves out into different roles in the community and hierarchies typically emerge, each person is a valuable member of the community. Each person has a **right** to the basic resources necessary for health and thriving, such as shelter, food, companionship, safety, and health care. Those necessary resources should be distributed **equitably**.

Because of natural interdependencies, including the sharing of both conditions and resources, public health encompasses the health of **all people** living within an area, regardless of their lineage or legality. Public health programs are **inclusive**.

Public health policies are best carried out **cooperatively** with the population, and when people act in **solidarity** with each other. Voluntary public participation stems from a high level of public **trust** in public health institutions and professionals. Trust is earned with policies and practices that demonstrate transparency, accountability, humility, and more. Conversely, public health policies are best received when implemented with the **least amount of coercion** possible and responses to health threatening events that are **proportional** to the size of the threat.

Principles for the ethical practice of public health

1. **Caring**
They appreciate the interdependencies in nature, including those with and among humans, and seek to ensure a balance that enables current and future generations of humans to thrive. They seek to prevent health risks from arising and they fulfill their responsibilities with empathy and compassion, protecting the rights of individuals.
2. **Responsive**
When there is a public health threat, they attend to it in a timely manner. And when a public health policy or practice is challenged, they listen intently to understand the concern and respond to it with respect and adaptation if need be.
3. **Trustworthy**
They are honest about what they know and humble about what they don't know. They follow through on commitments or work with those to whom a commitment was made for a mutually agreeable adjustment.
4. **Flexible**
They accommodate differences between groups when doing so doesn't compromise the safety of others. When they learn that a policy or program is ineffective or inadequate, they either end or adapt it.
5. **Collaborative**
They communicate and coordinate with other agencies, organizations, and countries to address public health concerns. They collaborate with the public through public meetings. They enable individuals, both public health professionals and the public, to work in solidarity with each other toward policies and practices that bring health and thriving.
6. **Fair**
They do not ask the public to do more than is necessary, and they seek an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens. They do not enact policies without conferring with those who will be affected by them.

7. Informed

They base their policies and programs on input from stakeholders and reliable data. They seek to understand the health-related context of particular places, including historical forces that shape the present.

8. Accountable

They are transparent about their processes and actions, they provide a means for the public to express their perspectives, and they learn from their mistakes.

9. Communicative

They share information that enables the public to effectively participate in the protection of interdependent health and to work in solidarity with each other.

10. Effective

They train their employees or personally learn skills that enable them to safely, effectively, and compassionately carry out their responsibilities. They evaluate their policies and practices and share lessons learned with other institutions and professionals.