

A Laboratory Professional's Identity as a United States Public Health Service Officer



Lt. Cmdr. David Hamilton, MLS (ASCP)

Did you know there are eight uniformed services in the United States? Six of those are made up of the military branches (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and Space Force) and the seventh is the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps (NOAA Corps). The last is the Commissioned Corps of the U.S. Public Health Service

(USPHS), known as *America's Health Responders*.

On July 16, 1798, President John Adams signed an act passed by the Fifth Congress that required healthcare for merchant seamen, initiating Public Health Service.¹ Public healthcare needs progressed over the next several decades and on January 4, 1889, the U.S. Public Health Service was created to fill shortages in the Marine Hospital Service, which in 1912 was renamed to Public Health Service.¹ Life expectancy of the public has increased over 30 years since its creation. Protecting, promoting, and advancing the health and safety of our nation is the mission of USPHS Commissioned Corps.¹

The USPHS Commissioned Corps, led by the Assistant Secretary for Health and U.S. Surgeon General, is currently comprised of over 6,000+ healthcare professionals dedicated to serve at the forefront in defending threats against the public health of this nation.¹ U.S. Public Health Service active-duty officers are also ready for responding to public health emergencies. "As the cornerstone of U.S. crisis response, officers deploy to natural disasters, disease outbreaks, global public health emergencies, and serve on humanitarian assistance missions."¹

U.S. Public Health Service officer healthcare specialties include physicians, dentists, nurses, pharmacists, clinical and rehabilitation therapists, dieticians, engineers, health and environmental health officers, scientists, and veterinarians.¹ These U.S. Public Health Service officers are found in all 50 states and other foreign assignments, working for 20+ federal departments or agencies (e.g., Food and Drug Administration, Centers for Disease Control and Federal Bureau of Prisons).¹

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is responsible for the custody and care of over 158,000 inmates in 122 facilities across the U.S.² The BOP employs healthcare professionals, civilian and U.S. Public Health Service officers, to provide medical, dental, and mental health services.² Acute and chronic health conditions are treated within ambulatory care units as well as medical referral centers (MRC).²

There are six MRC facilities who operate onsite College of American Pathologists (CAP) clinical laboratories. Each laboratory employs a combination of civil service and U.S. Public Health Service officer medical laboratory scientists (MLS). Laboratory professionals serve in various roles such as laboratory managers, MLS generalists or specialists, and healthcare administrators for this agency. I spent 8+ years working as a BOP civilian MLS employee at the Federal Medical Center (FMC) in Lexington, Kentucky where approximately 1,200 to 1,500 inmates are housed. This laboratory performed testing in hematology, general chemistry, urinalysis, and immunology. Each of the laboratory professionals have daily interactions with inmate patients, which included performing phlebotomy. While providing care for inmate patients can be challenging due to security policies, laboratory testing was performed according to community standards, including Clinical Laboratory Improvement Amendments (CLIA) law and College of American Pathology (CAP) accreditation guidelines.

As a civilian employee, I worked side by side with U.S. Public Health Service officers in and out of the laboratory. I worked as a generalist approximately five years until being promoted to laboratory manager. Collaborating with those officers made an impact on my professional life that led to a decision to convert to uniformed service. On October 5, 2015, I officially began my career as a U.S. Public Health Service officer as the laboratory manager at FMC Lexington. While my job duties as the laboratory manager did not change, the role I played and the mission it filled was much different. My responsibilities were no longer confined inside the walls of the laboratory but had expanded to the role of improving health of the underserved and vulnerable populations throughout the U.S.

Soon after beginning my career in the USPHS, the BOP promoted me to fill the role of National Laboratory Administrator. This position is centered entirely on the administrative scope of practice functions such as implementing economically efficient strategies for operating the six diagnostic clinical laboratories, determining what services will be provided, designing quality management plans, evaluating the utilization of laboratory tests, and providing consultation for agency leadership. Having a national impact through this administrative position, aligned perfectly with the mission of the USPHS Commissioned Corps, where healthcare is being delivered to an underserved and vulnerable population of patients in the BOP.

One of my responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic was to procure laboratory testing resources to meet the demands of the pandemic. In the beginning stages of the pandemic, my office was inundated with "Covid-19 Test Kits" claiming to have a reliable methodology for detecting the virus. It was my responsibility to determine if the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had issued an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) for each kit and examine their reliability. Through these reviews, national contracts were obtained to perform Covid-19 testing. Covid-19 presented some unique challenges for every healthcare provider, but the challenges were magnified because of the congregated settings found in prisons. To effectively navigate congregated settings during a pandemic, a tremendous amount of testing resources was required. While the situation presented overwhelming moments at times, the satisfaction of leading the charge for making testing available on such a large scale, removed any negative emotions.

It is an honor to serve my country as a laboratory professional. As a U.S. Public Health Service officer, I found a purpose in my career that was not present prior to accepting my commission. Whether my role expands in the BOP or takes another direction for a different agency, the commitment will remain the same. “Our Mission is to protect, promote and advance the health and safety of our nation.”¹ “In Officio Salutis” (In Service of Health).¹

References

1. Commissioned Corps of the United States Public Health Service [Internet]. Washington: c2021 [cited 2022 July 12]. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Available from: <https://www.usphs.gov/about-us>.
2. Federal Bureau of Prisons [Internet]. Washington: c2022 [cited 2022 July 12]. U.S. Department of Justice. Available from: <https://www.bop.gov/about>.