

Perspective: Advancing Public Health in Rhode Island and Beyond

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Over a decade ago, Brown University formally established a unified School of Public Health, bringing together epidemiologists, behavioral scientists, health services researchers, data scientists, clinicians, policy experts, and community advocates. At the base of College Hill emerged a dynamic intellectual community committed to rigorous scholarship, innovative teaching, and public impact. In this issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal*, we showcase the depth and breadth of that work. The centers and initiatives featured here represent both the school's foundation and trajectory—rooted in people and place, responsive to urgent challenges, and driven by a shared commitment to improving lives.

Each year, faculty and research staff at Brown dedicate more than 600,000 hours to research, produce over 1,000 peer-reviewed publications, and engage with more than 75 local organizations to promote public health. Just as importantly, the school's work is deeply embedded in Rhode Island through research, internships, service, and teaching. That engagement reflects a much longer history—one that reaches well beyond the school's formal founding in 2013.

For nearly 150 years, Brown scholars and alumni have helped shape public health here in Rhode Island, regionally, and beyond. In the early twentieth century, **CHARLES VALUE CHAPIN, MD**, a Brown University graduate, led Providence through public health crises by championing local data, targeted intervention, and community trust. The 1970s saw the creation of a department at Brown focused on community health, and in the decades that followed, researchers built an evidence base for more humane models of care, including hospice services, that helped shape national policy and expand access to end-of-life care for millions of Americans. By the mid-1990s, undergraduate advocacy led to the creation of a formal concentration in public health, a momentum that set the stage for the early 2000s, when Brown committed to establishing a full-fledged school. This special issue is guest edited by **BESS H. MARCUS, PhD**, a Professor of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University and the School of Public Health's second dean. From her vantage point as former dean and as a leading public health scholar in promoting physical activity in underserved and vulnerable populations, this issue is a sampling of the diverse areas of focus of public health at Brown.

Today, the school's commitment spans addiction science, aging and long-term care, health equity, child health

innovation, global health systems, climate and environmental health, pandemic response, and health system sustainability.

When federal or local policymakers need timely analysis on how legislation may affect everyday people or health systems, they often turn to Brown researchers, who are deeply involved in the community and helping people understand how public health policy happens in practice. When local health departments seek real-time infectious disease data, they can rely on the Pandemic Center's widely distributed Tracking Report that aggregates, interprets, and contextualizes published data relevant to domestic and international infectious disease outbreaks and presents it in a concise, reader-friendly format. When families and communities confront addiction, researchers at the Center for Alcohol and Addiction Studies and the People, Place, and Health Collective partner across Rhode Island to advance evidence-based approaches to prevention, treatment, and recovery.

Recent efforts are also advancing research on youth mental health and digital media, healthcare affordability, and the health impacts of environmental exposures—issues that are felt in our homes, clinics, and communities. From the Pawtucket Heart Health Program, to working with our health systems to advance health data science, to strengthening HIV prevention and treatment efforts in Kenya, the work of the school is shaped by partnership with those most affected by the challenges we study.

THE MISSION FORWARD

This is such an important time for schools of public health and for public health more broadly. Partnerships with the federal government are strained, confidence in health systems is shaken, and public trust in science is being tested. As schools of public health nationwide ask important questions about relevance and responsibility, Rhode Island's only school of public health is uniquely positioned to respond.

Over the past 5 years, the school has grown significantly in size, and now it's time for a different kind of growth. We are focused on growing our impact, including expanding how our work shows up in the health people experience in their everyday lives, strengthening how we use data and technologies like AI, sharpening our science, and communicating that science more effectively to drive changes in policy and practice.

Our focus is also on keeping the public health workforce pipeline strong. The students the school educates are the people who will practice public health and sustain it long into the future. That means thinking strategically about our training programs and ensuring that we are preparing students for the careers and callings that await them. This is especially important at a time when public health systems have faced significant strain over the past year. Equally important in this next chapter is expanding the school's impact in the communities it serves. That includes Providence, where we work and many of us live, Rhode Island more broadly, and the communities we partner with globally—in places like China, India, the U.K., and across Europe.

The school's mission is about more than meeting the public health moment that we are in, it is recognizing our past, capitalizing on our strengths, and anticipating the future.

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