



Region IV Public Health Training Center
A MEMBER OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH TRAINING CENTER NETWORK

Leading Public Health Podcast: Leadership Journey Series

Episode 1: Building Public Health Career with Moose Alperin EdD, MPH, MCHES

Liz Kidwell (LK): Welcome to Leading Public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. Through this podcast, we explore current leadership, challenges, strategies and ideas to help build the capacity of the current and future public health workforce. In this series, we will be meeting with public health professionals to discuss the journey of leadership. My name is Liz Kidwell, and I'll be your host as we explore topics relevant to public health leaders at any stage of their career.

LK: Today I'm thrilled to be joined by Moose Alperin, Director of the Region IV Public Health Training Center. She's here today to talk with us about the building blocks of a career in public health. Thanks for joining us, Moose. We're so excited for you to be here with us today. And to get started, I would love for you to just tell us about yourself and your current role.

Moose Alperin (MA): Thank you for the introduction and for inviting me. So, in terms of my day job, I am on faculty at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in Atlanta, in the Department of Behavioral, Social and Health Education Sciences. Additionally, to my 2 main hats, I am the director of the Executive MPH program, which is the online MPH for working professionals at the Rollins school of Public Health, and I am also, as you mentioned, the PI and the Director of the Region IV Public Health Training Center, which is one of 10 training centers funded by HRSA. And so, of the three main buckets of activities that our training center provides, first, we provide training for the current public health workforce. Secondly, field placements- Internships for our current public health workforce. And thirdly, we provide technical assistance and consultation for health departments and other Community organizations. You know, there's some other projects here and there, but those are the big ones.

LK: Thank you so much for that introduction. And since this podcast, you know, we're really focused on leadership here and this series. We really want to dive into the journey of leadership as we go. So if you could just tell us about your personal leadership journey and really how you got where you are today in your public health career?

MA: Absolutely. And I will say, you know, in many ways, I fell into public health by accident and I was not somebody that, you know, when I was a little child said when I grew up, I want to be a public health person. That was one of those people who contemplated medical school and sort of the medical route but didn't go that way. As an undergraduate, I was a Judaic studies major. I went to school, you know, at a place that focused on liberal arts. I had a family that was supportive of a liberal arts degree. And really for me, my undergraduate experience taught me how to communicate, how to think, how to how to be a citizen of the world. And my senior year in college, I

did discover Community health courses, and I overloaded my schedule, taking a whole lot of these Community health courses. In reality, it probably took me a few years to realize that I had actually discovered public health during my undergraduate years. But you know, as I sort of think about it, fast forward to my undergrad graduation, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I had, as I said dabbled with going to Medical school. But that really wasn't right, so I graduated, I came home, came back to Atlanta, and then one day I was looking at the Emory University course catalog and I saw an epidemiology course and it sounded really interesting. And I think in many ways it was sort of the real-life version of the mysteries that I liked to read. So, I enrolled in as a status that was then called a student special standing. So, I took that epidemiology course, then I took a Biostatistics course. Then I took a history public health course and by that time I was hooked. And by the next fall I had matriculated as a degree seeking student in Emory's MPH program.

MA: You know, my work is all practice based. It really involves working with and on behalf of the practicing public health workforce. And I think one of the real keys for me was having a wonderful mentor. Dr. Kathy Miner was that for me. Her first role in my life was she was my professor and then she was my boss. But ultimately, she was my mentor. She introduced me to local public health. I remember going to a health department in Middle Georgia and watching her facilitate a meeting. She took me to professional conferences, both as an attendee and as a presenter, and my very first presentation at a national conference was because of her. I was on a panel that talked about the future of health education and it was me and all of these health education luminaries. She also provided me with leadership opportunities in programs that she and then later we ran. You know, and along the way, one of the things that I think Kathy taught me is the importance of giving back to your profession. It was instilled in me really very early in my career. I have been involved in numerous professional organizations. But I've also had opportunities to serve in more formal leadership roles. Most notably, right now I serve on the APHA, the American Public Health Association Executive Board, which is a position that I was elected to in 2021. And as I was thinking about the podcast and knowing that I was going to talk with you, I thought about sort of my career and the trajectory. I know folks who have been very strategic in their careers-they've had a road map from day one. They've known exactly what they were going to do and when they were going to do it. And I think probably in recent years I've been a little more strategic. But I certainly wasn't early on and it's not really how I have operated. And I think part of the fun of my career has been that because I haven't always had that road map, I haven't always known where I would be at various points in time. So it's been sort of fun to see where I have landed and when I have landed there.

LK: Absolutely, you know I think that some of our listeners will really, really resonate with that because I don't think everyone always has a perfect road map for their career. Or maybe they do and things change. So I think that that's really great advice to just be flexible and learn as you go because you can pick things up as you as you go in your career. So I think you kind of touched on this a little bit, but I would love to hear more about who or what you know inspires you in your work.

MA: Well, I've mentioned Doctor Kathy Minor. She was an enormous influence on me. Part of it was the opportunities that she afforded me, having me tag along to meetings and engaging me in projects. But a lot of it is also the selfless way in which she did it. She had no ego involved, you know, she realized she wanted to see me grow. She wanted to see me be successful. And as I think about her relationship with me and many of the other young professionals that she worked with, she really made us shine. She gave us responsibility and we all ended up rising to the occasion. As I

think about my own work, one of the things that makes me happy and that gives me I guess some sense of joy, is knowing that I'm helping others do their jobs more efficiently, more effectively. Whether it is an MPH student who is in a formal program of study and learning new skills, or perhaps public health workers who are taking courses through the Region IV Public Health Training Center or some other project that I've been involved with. But really, you know, that opportunity to work with and interact with real people, doing real work that's really fun. It's the projects that have me leaving my physical office, learning more about people and what they do and local public health, that really is some of the most rewarding work that I do. And it's also, I will say, very fun when later down the line I have somebody come back to me and say, hey, that really made a difference, you know, being in that course or being part of that project and so that's really sort of fun and enjoyable for me.

LK: So in your work, it sounds like you really interact with students and early career professionals are pretty fair amount. So what's some advice that you have for them?

MA: Well, since this is a podcast about leadership, I should probably say that I think there is a little bit of a leader in all of us. You know, I think for some people that leadership may come out in formal leadership roles. But for many others, I think it's more informal. You know, earlier I described myself as perhaps not being as strategic as I could have been in my own career. But I really do encourage new professionals to first and foremost think about their career and their career path and not just thinking about their current job or what their next job is going to be.

LK: Absolutely, I think that makes a lot of sense. So tell me a little more about that distinction, that job versus career distinction.

MA: Well for me a job is really sort of that single position of employment. It's that one thing you're doing right then or you're seeking to do. But a career has really developed throughout a person's professional life and a career path is really that process of professional maturation that results from multiple things, experience and job advancement, and perhaps continuing professional education. For early level or early career professionals, I think a career path provides individuals with specific goals to target. And by achieving those goals, these professionals are able to build a career that sustains over time. Therefore, a job is not just a job, but it really is one step to that larger picture of building a career. And I believe that you find leadership opportunities along that path. They may sometimes be formal leadership opportunities. But then they also, and I think they definitely you, will find informal leadership opportunities along that path.

LK: I think a lot of our listeners are going to be, you know, people from all walks of their career. So all different stages of where they are in their careers. So as individuals think about their careers, what's some of the advice you would give them?

MA: Well, I'll start with students and new professional. And I think some of the things to consider are thinking about basic building blocks of the professional that folks either have or they want to have. So thinking about skills for example, you know what skills do you need for an entry level into that profession, or what skills do you need to move beyond entry level or beyond early career? Agencies who hire people you know, into this profession- You know what skill set are they looking for? Thinking about literature-What's the defined literature of a profession you know, are there particular journals or texts or authors that that, you know, you should be reading? And professional

organizations, what are professional organizations that individuals in a particular profession should join know? Who are that professions recognize leaders? So those will be things I think to think about in general about the profession that you have or the profession that you want. But I also think you need to have some own self-awareness. It's not just that the profession has definition but think about yourself. You know what is the set of skills that you have? What are the skills that you want to be acquiring? What skills do your peers or your perhaps employers expect you to have? You know what are the skills that can advance your career, either with your current employer, or our future employers? And what are the skills that are needed by your profession in the future? So not just thinking about sort of the time space that you're in now, but thinking sort of in a forward fashion and thinking about the future. I would also think about how you solicit feedback on your performance. You know, think about how do you know what your areas of strength are? What are your opportunities for growth? And you know in addition to you identifying these things, are there others in your life that might also help you identify these things so that you know those strengths and those opportunities for growth.

LK: Yeah, I think that's really important. So thank you so much for sharing that. And where do you feel colleagues and mentors come in and this really and this advice that you have for people in their careers.

MA: Well, I think colleagues, you know, some of whom become mentors are absolutely essential. When I think about my own colleagues, I think about having a network of colleagues and having different kinds of colleagues. There's my core network. So they're the people that are sort of my close colleagues with whom I can brainstorm and problem solve. Perhaps sometimes admit I don't know something and let my hair down and have you know some of those real kind of conversations. I also have extended network. You know, I have the individuals who are part of my broader network that I can also use as a resource. I also think it's important to think about having a network that includes all levels of professionals. So individuals that perhaps are professionally younger colleagues. They're really good at helping to identify how a profession is currently responding to issues, you know, helping think through new ideas, new thinking. You know, individuals who are perhaps professionally older colleagues can provide some historical perspective. And I think both of those things are really important. And the balance of both of those are really important. And hopefully you know some of your colleagues turn into or are mentors or are role models. You know, when I think about those who have sort of risen to the role of mentor, I think about those that are perhaps formal mentors as well as informal mentors. I think about people who can provide me with general career advice or maybe discipline specific advice. So I think there is room and there should be room for multiple people who can provide all kinds of professional guidance, through different lenses and through different perspectives.

LK: Thank you so much for expanding on that. And I know you've spoken quite a bit during this interview about different mentors you have specifically on Dr Kathy Minor because she was one of your first professors. So what advice do you have for people, wherever they are in their career, about finding mentors?

MA: Well first and foremost, I would say. Keep your eyes open, they can be anywhere. If you're in an academic setting, I think oftentimes professors serve as mentors. Depending on your job, there may be a formal mentor program where you are aligned with or assigned to somebody who serves

as a mentor. You know if I think outside of my relationship with Kathy, my mentors have often emerged in more organic and informal ways. Now I have looked for colleagues who are more seasoned than I am, whether it is related to my grant work, you know, maybe it's somebody who has done work longer than I have or is connected in different ways than I'm connected or I think about my involvement in professional organizations. These are individuals that I learned from and I've learned from them to this day. I may be 30 years into a career, but I still find myself looking to others for guidance. On the flip side, for some people, I'm the seasoned professional and I'm the one that is, you know, perhaps more seasoned than some of my colleagues. And in those relationships, I'm perhaps the mentor, not the mentee. So, I find that I am both mentor and mentee in different relationships. You know one of the areas I think I have, you know, touched on here and there, but I probably should talk about more intentionally. Is the role of professional organizations and the importance of being involved in professional organizations.

LK: Could you expand a little on that topic? Professional organizations?

MA: Absolutely. I am a huge proponent of being involved in one's professional organization. There are numerous reasons to join professional organizations. For those who perhaps are not yet involved, being a part of a professional organization, provides you with an opportunity to present your work. There are opportunities to network. There are opportunities to be a mentor, be a mentee. You know, oftentimes there are professional development opportunities. So there may be conferences that you can attend or present your work. You know, journals to read, webinars, other educational sessions. You know, a lot of professional organizations may also have career and job resources. So if you're somebody that is at a part of your career, where you're looking for some of those kind of resources, you may find them. If you are a student or you are a new professional, I always encourage folks to look and see if there is a membership category that supports you. If so, it is often less expensive. You know, in a couple of ways to think about professional organizations is both thinking about discipline specific organizations vs general public health organizations and thinking about national vs state and I'll give you a couple of examples. I am a health educator and so for me, a discipline specific organization is a Society of Public Health Education or SOPHE. You know folks who may be evaluators, there is the American Evaluation Association, you know, for others with Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. And I could go on and on, you know, naming organizations that are discipline specific. Compare that to an organization like APHA, the American Public Health Association, which I think of as being more general public health, although certainly with any APHA there are discipline specific units and units that focus on particular content or topical areas. But those would give you some examples when I talk about thinking, discipline versus general public health. Thinking about national versus state, APHA is a good example of that. You have the American Public Health Association and they then have state and regional affiliates. So in addition, for example to my belonging to APHA, I also belong to the state affiliate, the Georgia Public Health Association. And I think there is a place to be involved with all of the above with both the state and the national organizations. As well as discipline specific or more broad organization. And since we're talking about leadership today, involvement in professional organizations is a great way to build your leadership portfolio and to get involved in formal leadership roles. One thing I will also mention when I talk about state vs national organizations is for new professionals sometimes it's easier to first engage at the state level and with the state organization before you get to a national. Sometimes you have mentors like I did who take you along

to some of those national meetings as well. So I sort of got taken to national meetings and state meetings. But that's not something that everybody naturally necessarily has those inroads in those connections. So sometimes it is easier to engage first at the state level versus the national level.

LK: Circling back to this idea of mentorship that we've touched on a bit, I would love to hear you talk about anyone that you've mentored yourself and really how those relationships have influenced your career in public health.

MA: Well I like being a connector. And I think that a lot of mentoring is making connections for people, so taking you know listening and talking with somebody and learning what would help them advance in their career or whatever area they're looking to advance. And so I find that when I mentor others, I'm often making connections for those individuals and connecting them to other people or connecting them to other resources. And I think one of the things about being a mentor is it also allows me to see issues that are perhaps important to me and things that I have grappled with, but to see it through another lens and to see it through somebody else's, you know, perspective and their eyes. And sometimes that's similar to my own, but it can also challenge my own views. It can challenge the way I think. I think also it allows me to be introspective and I think it's good to sort of challenge oneself and to rethink how I think and how we all think about different topics. So I enjoy that process. I also have found that with some of the mentor and mentee relationships that I have and the more I get to know somebody, sometimes the tables flip, sometimes the mentee then becomes the mentor in some situations. and I have found that and I have enjoyed that flip and quite honestly, I think there are some people that you know, when we talk about certain topics on the mentor and when we talk about other topics that perhaps maybe the mentee.

LK: Absolutely, I think that's really important. And I think that also helps you know, maybe who was the mentee build that confidence because you know we all bring different things to the table. So I do think that that's really important. So as we wrap up today's episode, and I really appreciate you being here and all the advice that you've given, I want to kind of touch on this idea of continuing learning because we are a Public Health Training Center. So I would love to hear what is the last training that you participated in that you really felt was influential to you?

MA: Well, you know, I'm not sure if this is actually the last training, but it certainly was an impactful training. It was a training by the Racial Equity Institute that was designed to develop the capacity of the training participants to really better understand institutional and structural forms of racism. And as I think back on it, and I think about the impact that it that had on me, it made me rethink the historical narrative that I thought I knew, and it challenged me to sort of rethink that and to revisit it. And it really required that I be thoughtful about my own perspectives and about my own biases, and be willing to accept that I had those. And quite honestly, there were times that was uncomfortable to do. But I think it was important to do and so, you know, as I think about that experience and I think about perhaps final advice that I would provide to new and emerging leaders in public health, I think the advice that I would leave people with is to seek opportunities to engage with people and to engage with ideas and to recognize that some perspectives may be similar to your own, but more importantly, engage with folks that have different perspectives than your own and be open to listening and to learning and to re-thinking what you know an re-thinking what you think you know. You don't have to agree with all things that all people say, but as a leader, I think it's really important

to be willing to engage with others and to challenge yourself. And so that is, I think sort of where I would leave some of my advice for those that are new and emerging leaders.

LK: Thank you so much. I think that's really fantastic advice and I really appreciate you being here today and sharing your knowledge and expertise, talking to us about the building blocks of a career in public health, I really enjoyed our discussion. So thanks so much for joining us today.

MA: Thank you.

LK: We hope you enjoyed this episode of leading public Health, a podcast from the Region IV Public Health Training Center at Emory University. We value your feedback, so please take a minute to complete the evaluation located in the show notes. Thank you for joining us.