



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

Leading Public Health Podcast: Leadership Journey Series

Episode 3: Early Career Development with Nellie Garlow, MPH

Liz Kidwell (LK): Today I'm thrilled to be joined by Nellie Garlow. Nellie is an HIV surveillance epidemiologist at the Georgia Department of Public Health, where she monitors emerging trends among individuals with HIV and presents data in a variety of formats to stakeholders. Through her current role, she serves as a leader by supervising a junior epidemiologist, mentoring interns and fellows, and speaking at universities about careers in state epidemiology. Nellie has served in the field of public health for nearly ten years, working in areas ranging from infectious disease, to maternal child health, to substance use disorder. She received her Master of Public Health and Epidemiology from Emory University, and her Bachelor of Arts in Public Health from Franklin and Marshall College. She is here today to talk with us about early career development and share tips she has learned along the way.

LK: Thank you for joining us, Nellie. We're so excited to have you here with us today. So, to get started, can you tell us a little more about yourself and your current role?

Nellie Garlow (NG): Yes. To expand on my current role as an HIV epidemiologist, I'm not only focused on producing accurate data and analysis, but I've also recently become very focused on data communication, data visualization, and data storytelling. My goal is for it to be as easy as possible for our stakeholders to understand the big take away stories when it comes to HIV trends in Georgia, and there are several ways in which I work to achieve that goal. I make our data visualizations, which are often trend charts or figures, as clean and simple and memorable as possible. I also come up with easy-to-understand key take away phrases so that stakeholders can have a message in mind when building prevention programs or talking with other partners about HIV epidemics. And finally, I attend a lot of different community meetings to bring the data directly to stakeholders and also use it as an opportunity to learn from stakeholders about what types of epidemiologic questions they want answered and what would be helpful in informing their work.

LK: Great. Thank you so much for sharing more about your current role and really what you do at the Georgia Department of Public Health. Can you tell us about what inspired you to get into your line of public health work?

NG: A lot of people in my family have either worked in healthcare or the public health space, so public health was always on my radar. But when I was in college, I took a course on global maternal health and read Nicholas Kristof's and Sheryl WuDunn's book *Half the Sky* which is named after an old proverb that women hold up half the sky. And this book really opened my eyes through these intimate stories of individual women halfway across the world who were facing some really serious health issues, and it really pulled at my heartstrings. But what I loved, especially about this book, is

that at the very end, the authors layout tangible action items that the reader can take to improve the situation, and that's really what got me hooked on public health. It's inherently a field that is focused on hope. We do the work we do as public health professionals because we have hope that we can make the world a better place and that there are tools at our disposal to make a meaningful impact.

LK: That's so inspiring and I really appreciate you sharing that part of your story. I'd love to hear a little more about your journey in public health and any other inspiration you've found that has really led you to where you are today.

NG: Yes. So after college, I worked in the field of health policy in Washington, DC at Mathematica for five years and through that job I got exposed to a lot of different public health areas, from maternal child health to the opioid crisis. I always knew that I wanted to pursue a master's in public health to further my skills. So in thinking through which path to pursue, I read the book *What the Eyes Don't See* by Mona Hanna-Attisha, who was a pediatrician treating children in the early days of the Flint water crisis in Michigan. This story was amazing for so many reasons. But one thing that really stood out to me was how she and her statistician looked at the data on kids with elevated lead levels in a different way than was already being done, and it allowed them to show that, yes, there were frightening increases happening in childhood lead poisoning that were tied to this switch of which water source was being used in the area. I'd also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the community voices that were really important in raising the alarm bells in this story as well, but the the section on her and her statisticians work really taught me that having data skills is so important when you're working to support communities impacted by health challenges. So even though I had not taken a math class since high school, I really took a leap of faith and decided to study epidemiology at the Rollins School of Public Health for my master's degree.

LK: Wow. Yeah, that's such a really interesting story and sounds really inspirational. And so I appreciate you sharing that. Can you tell us a little bit more about why you decided to pursue a public health career specifically in government?

NG: When I first started grad school, I knew I wanted to gain data analysis skills and learn coding, but I didn't really have a strong understanding of what it looked like to be a practicing epidemiologist in the field, and specifically in the government. So I set a goal for myself to have at least one experience during grad school practicing epidemiology at the local, state and federal government levels. And I am pleased to say that I accomplished that. From the local perspective for my thesis work, I worked with the Fulton County Board of Health to help them analyze data from a recent survey they conducted at Atlanta Pride and Black Pride Festivals. That helped me to understand how you collect on the ground and how it can inform local actions. From the state perspective, I had my summer practicum with a maternal health epidemiology team here at the Georgia Department of Public Health. And I absolutely loved my mentor. She set a really fast pace for the internship and provided me with all of the tools I needed. I got a lot of good experience forming a research question, cleaning raw data, analyzing the data, and presenting the data. So, there's really a full scope experience. And then finally, for my federal experience, throughout the school year, I was an intern at the CDC. One year I was on a maternal health team. The next year on an HIV team, and that was a wonderful experience because it exposed me to experts in their field

and taught me about the diversity of epidemics and responses that are happening around the nation.

LK: Great. So after I guess these three experiences which were local, state and at the federal level, what really made you ultimately decide to work at the state level?

NG: Yeah. So there were things that I really loved about each of those three levels. I decided that the state level was the best fit for me. I referred to it as my Goldilocks fit because it allowed me to work directly with local health departments and learn from them and support them with data. It also allows me to monitor the health of a large state population. We have 11 million residents in Georgia and simultaneously it allows me to partner very frequently with federal experts and also a variety of states around the nation too.

LK: Absolutely. Um. I love that. I love how you figured that out by working at each different level and then just kind of finding the fit that was really right for you. So, since our podcast is really kind of focused on the leadership journey, can you tell us more about your specific leadership journey throughout your public health career?

NG: In terms of my leadership journey, I really need to give a lot of credit to the mentors that I had. When I worked in health policy in DC at Mathematica, I had several mentors who were always pushing me to be my best and who gave me work opportunities that I thought were above my level. But these mentors really felt that I was ready for the challenge. Just to give you one example, I learned qualitative research on the job at Mathematica, and my mentors had me very early in my career co-leading interviews with participants and then they phased me up to leading interviews independently. And then after a few years, I was the one who was advising new teams on strategies for best practices in qualitative research. Additionally, at Mathematica I was trained as a project manager, so from very early on in my career I learned things like how to manage a budget, how to write a proposal, identify risks, and keep staff organized.

LK: Wow, so you really kind of jumped in headfirst in a lot of ways into leadership it sounds like. Was there a point at which you really kind of knew that you wanted to take on more leadership roles?

NG: So after I got my master's and started working at the Georgia Department of Public Health, I felt like it was time in my career to start taking on more leadership opportunities. But because I still felt new in the field of epidemiology, I thought I should start small. After I got my sea legs, I started off by bringing some interns onto our team so that I could practice how to teach epidemiology to others, how to review their work and how to keep them on track. Then after about a year, I felt ready to request that I get a full-time supervisee to help me expand the line of work I was doing, and thankfully, leadership on my team was very supportive of this.

LK: That's great. Thank you so much for sharing that. After reflecting on your career journey thus far, what do you feel has most significantly really helped you in this leadership journey?

NG: Something that's been really helpful for me has been getting feedback from the people that I am leading. When I run a 12-week internship program, I ask my interns to fill out a survey at the 6-week mark and also the 12-week mark about how their experience is going, if I should be making any changes. And I take their feedback really seriously. It doesn't matter if I think I'm doing a good job as their supervisor if it's not resonating with my supervisee. Everyone needs a bit of a different

approach and sometimes directly asking is a great way to get that information. It also shows that you are invested in giving them the best experience you can and that you value their work on your team. I also do something very similar with my supervisee during our annual review period.

LK: Yes, feedback is such an important part of learning and becoming a better leader overall, so thank you for sharing that. Anything else you have found to really be helpful throughout this process and your journey as a leader?

NG: Another thing that I think has really helped me in my leadership journey has been being part of the Public Health and Primary Care Leadership Institute for Region IV. I think it can be hard to imagine what a new leadership role looks like when you're only seeing how the structures work within your own health department. But when you're part of a regional group, you are exposed to so many different teams, styles and experiences it can really open your eyes. It was also very helpful to see so many people who were new to their field just like me, and they were already taking on new leadership positions. I like the way that the leadership institution's staff say that to be a leader you just need to have an idea that you are seeing forward and that you don't necessarily need to be leading a team per se. This really resonated with me because I identify as a gap finder. In all of my work and school experiences, I've tended to take a lot of time to get to know the current system at play, and after that, work on identifying gaps that exist and executing actionable solutions. I have a lot of grit, so seeing things through until the end is something that I can make happen. I'm very appreciative of the role that the leadership institution has played in my leadership journey because it gave me an additional support network that helped to boost my confidence as I was venturing out into these new leadership roles.

LK: And we are so glad to have you, to have had you as part of our leadership institute and now as an alumni. So thanks so much for sharing your experience with that. We appreciate hearing that it was a valuable experience for you. So with everything that you've learned so far, can you share some advice for public health students who are getting started in their careers and maybe who are interested in different public health paths?

NG: Yes. I have four career tips for public health students to consider as they're thinking about what they want to pursue after graduation. My first tip is to recognize what brings you energy and really to follow that. I remember reading the book *Designing Your Life* by two Stanford design professors who recommend designing your career using the same methods that Apple would design the next iPhone with, for example. Their top tip is prototyping. So, what does that mean from a career perspective? It means having informational interviews with people who work in different careers and imagining what it would be like for you to work there. Does it feel energizing during this conversation or draining? If it feels exciting and energizing, follow that path forward.

My second piece of advice is to network with everyone you can because you really never know where an opportunity will lead. In grad school I attended a lunchtime talk where an epidemiologist from the Georgia Department of Public Health spoke about her job in Legionnaires' disease. And afterwards, I went up to her and asked if she had any colleagues in maternal health who she could connect me with since I was really interested in the maternal health field at the time, and she made this connection for me. So when I later spoke with this maternal health epidemiology, I was really just genuinely trying to understand what her day-to-day job looked like, but at the end of the call, she said to me would you be interested in interning with us this summer? And I said absolutely, I

don't have anything lined up right now, and I would love to work on your team. Where can I submit an application? And to that, she said we actually don't have an open application posted. We just wait for motivated students like you to approach us. And, if we have the bandwidth and need we take on an intern. So that experience showed me to always look for opportunities that currently exist as well as opportunities that could exist.

My third recommendation is to discover what you like by trying new things. Halfway through grad school, all of my work was really focused on maternal health, and I wasn't 100% sure if that was the area I wanted to focus on, but I was also scared of losing all of this momentum and knowledge I had been building up and wasn't really sure what else to dive into. But when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I started to think more about infectious diseases and decided to take a leap of faith and change over from focusing on maternal child health to infectious disease, and specifically HIV. And I'm very glad that I did this because it led me to my career today.

Finally, my 4th recommendation is to be picky. This is good advice to follow whether you're selecting a career or a romantic partner. Focusing on the career aspect, my recommendation is to really hone in on what you want to pursue and head after it. When I was coming up on graduation from grad school, I decided I only wanted to apply to state and local epidemiology positions because I really wanted to be closer to the action. I did feel a lot of pressure to apply to jobs at the federal level or in the private industry, but I stuck to my guns. I didn't hear back from a lot of jobs, and I was starting to get nervous. But I stayed the path, and my current position at the Georgia Department of Public Health ended up working out nicely.

LK

That's great. And I think those are some really great tips. So, thank you so much for sharing that. Do you have any specific advice for those who are interested in getting into epidemiology?

NG

For those who are interested in pursuing a career in epidemiology, I also have 4 tips. My first tip is to get involved with CSTE or the Council for State and Territorial Epidemiologists. If you work as a state epidemiologist, this will be your professional home. While you're a student, and even as an early professional, you can participate in their free mentorship program. I did this as a student, and it was extremely helpful in helping me realize that I did want to pursue a career on this path. Plus, I had a wonderful mentor who worked in tick borne disease surveillance in Pennsylvania. So I got exposed to a completely different field of epidemiology that I'd never worked in. Her work surveying Boy Scout troops was very, very interesting to learn about.

My second tip is to narrow down what field of epidemiology you want to work in. Most states organize epidemiologists by topical area, so take some time to decide if you want to pursue a career in wastewater surveillance, HIV, hepatitis, emerging infections, STD's. There are lots of options.

My third tip is to work on gaining a technical skill that's in high demand right now. When I interviewed with the Baltimore City Department of Health for an epidemiology position, they told me that they often have a hard time filling this type of position, and I asked them why there was this issue when there were so many different public health schools in the area. And they said that they needed an epidemiologist to come into the position with robust mapping skills and it wasn't

something that they had the capacity to teach an employee from the ground up. So if you can take a mapping or a GIS course, I definitely recommend that.

And my final tip is that if you're having a hard time finding an epidemiology position directly through a state or local health department, there are sometimes positions offered through consulting firms or external organizations. For example, you could apply to be a CDC Foundation employee where you are placed as an epidemiologist at a state health department. You can also ask epidemiologists at the departments you're interested in if they apply directly or apply through an external party to get into their current position.

LK

Great. That's some really great advice and really interesting. I know many of our listeners will find what you've shared today very helpful. Now, kind of as we get towards the end of our time together, because we are a public health training center and we are always focused on the idea of continual learning, I would love to hear, you know, about one of the last trainings you participated in that you felt was really influential to you and why?

NG

Through the Region IV Public Health Training Center, I learned about the Strengths-based Leadership course taught by Ariela Freedman of MavenTree, and I really loved this course. It helped me identify my strengths and keep them in mind as I move forward in my career, as well as in choosing what projects I pursue. I actually have my 5 strengths listed on an index card on my desk so that I can refer to them before I agree to get involved in a project. I also asked my supervisee to do the strength-based course, and we learned that we have different strengths, which is great news. It means we can balance each other out and rely on the other if a project requires strength that one of us doesn't have, but the other does. I really believe at this point in my career, it's time to double down on my strengths instead of focusing so much on my areas of weakness.

LK

Yes, absolutely. I'm so glad you enjoyed that workshop. It's definitely one of our most popular. I myself have also taken it and it is fantastic. It can be so helpful for us to understand our strengths as well as any opportunities for growth that you know, we might want to work on so that we can continue to learn and improve throughout our careers.

So, Nellie, thank you so much for joining me today on the podcast. I really appreciate all that you've shared. And I know our listeners will as well. For our listeners, we will be including all of the resources that we've talked about today and that Nelly has shared in the show notes. So just please look out for those there. Thank you again, Nelly. It was really a pleasure speaking with you.

NG

Thank you, Liz.

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