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# New Department of Health Facilitates a Focus on Public Health



**Sherri Young**  
West Virginia  
Department of Health

Dr. Sherri Young serves as Cabinet Secretary of the West Virginia Department of Health; she was appointed to the position in 2023 by Governor Justice. Prior to this role, Dr. Young and her team at the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department led the nationally recognized Unified Health Command team during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secretary Young is a past president of the West Virginia State Medical Association, West Virginia Academy of Family Physicians, and the Kanawha Medical Association. She has been honored with the YWCA Woman of Achievement Award, West Virginia Immunization Network Community Outreach Award, and the West Virginia Academy of Family Physicians' 2021 "Family Doc" Award.

In March of 2020, the world went into lockdown as fears of a novel virus swept across the globe. While the world did not know much about COVID-19 at that time, the need to act was clear. As the country's leading researchers worked around the clock towards treatment options, our state's health care professionals were inundated. Hospitals were packed with patients, and drive-through testing clinics were miles long.

As part of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department team that helped navigate the crisis, I saw firsthand the strength of our public health workforce as months of drive-through testing and vaccination clinics turned into years. The virus went on to take more than seven million lives globally, but it could have been a lot worse had our healthcare heroes not stood up during one of the most trying times in modern history.



The National Council of State Boards of Nursing released a study that found more than 100,000 registered nurses left the workforce following the pandemic due to stress and burnout. Other professions also experienced the strain. At one point during the crisis, the national unemployment rate reached 13 percent. As a result, leaders in public health and the country as a whole were forced to rethink the way they recruit and retain workers.

In June of 2023, I was appointed Interim Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Resources, charged with separating

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**"It's the people who make our state shine and they are the ones we must do everything in our power to support."**

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A year after the pandemic's official end, the toll on our healthcare workforce is far from over.



the state's largest agency into three separate departments. In my new role, I saw the stress on our workforce from a different perspective. It wasn't just our country's health care workers struggling, it was our social workers, teachers, parents, and children. Separating the state's largest agency with more than 6,000 employees meant not only creating three separate departments to address these issues, but also creating entirely new organizational structures within them. Through this work, we empowered leaders in

each area of expertise to sit down with employees in every level of their organization to identify areas for improvement.

This work continued in January of 2024, when I became Secretary for the West Virginia Department of Health. As many employees retired or moved on, we looked at every position to identify redundant services and determine whether the public could be better served through a re-focused role. In some cases, this meant allocating more resources to desperately needed services such as those in the Office of the State Medical Examiner (OCME). While not all of the changes

number of EMS crews available to respond in emergencies. Through Governor Jim Justice's 'Answer the Call' initiative, we offered no-cost education and training, invested in test preparation software to increase certification examination success, and promoted EMS careers across the state. As a result, we saw a 75% increase in the state's EMS workforce.

To effectively address public health threats moving forward, we must keep an eye to the future. We know that by 2029, more than 30% of our workforce in the Department of Health will be eligible for retirement. To find the key to keeping some of these



will create an immediate solution, we are moving in the right direction. We broke ground on a new state-of-the-art facility that will serve the OCME, Office of Laboratory Services, and the State Police Lab. We have included new equipment to reduce autopsy times and have raised the base salaries to recruit and retain Forensic Medical Examiners to better serve West Virginia citizens in some of their most difficult times.

In other areas of the Department of Health, we realigned services. In the Bureau for Public Health, for instance, we separated the role of the State Health Officer from the Commissioner. Our State Health Officer now focuses solely on improving public health and preparing for the next public health threat, while our commissioner can concentrate exclusively on administration and ensuring taxpayer dollars are truly serving the public.

In our Office of Emergency Medical Services (EMS), we identified a lack of funding for training that was limiting the

folks longer, we set out to talk to some of our longest-serving employees, including a nurse in Logan County named Karen Darnell with nearly 50 years of service to the state. When asked about the driving force behind her decades-long career, she answered it is simply the passion for the people she serves.

As public servants, it is our duty to preserve that passion for public health professionals like Darnell by providing them with the tools they need to succeed. After all, it's not a single person or plan that makes West Virginia shine in times of crisis, it's something embedded in our hearts. It's the nurse who works a 24-hour shift to make sure her patient takes her medicine. It's the neighbor who makes a grocery run for his elderly neighbor. And it's the driver who stops to help a complete stranger whose car is stranded. It's the people who make our state shine, and they are the ones we must do everything in our power to support. 