

From Private to Public—a Recruitment Solution for Public Health’s Tech Gap

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Author Bio

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Modernizing public health data systems requires advanced tech skills. The Workforce Acceleration Initiative is blazing a pathway for private sector tech talent to meet government needs for the benefit of communities nationwide.

Outdated information systems are limiting public health’s ability to detect and address real-time health threats. The stakes are high: old technology and disjointed systems weakened and slowed America’s COVID-19 response. Modernizing public health data systems is essential to avoid repeating the past and to enable more coordinated responses to measles and other emergencies.¹ And the benefits go beyond acting quickly in a crisis. Data modernization can equip public health agencies to make faster, better-informed decisions in every part of their daily work—from taking action on water safety to monitoring chronic disease trends.^{2,3}

But there’s a challenge: many public health agencies **lack sufficient in-house expertise** to build and use modern data infrastructure.

¹ Kadakia, K. T., & DeSalvo, K. B. (2023). Transforming public health data systems to advance the population’s health. *Millbank Quarterly*, 101(S1), 674–699. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12618>

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024, February 9). *About Environmental Public Health Tracking*. <https://www.cdc.gov/environmental-health-tracking/about/index.html>

³ The Network for Public Health Law. (2025, April 25). *Health information and data sharing issue brief: Chronic disease and data modernization — Opportunities (and safeguards) for enhanced public health data collection*. <https://www.networkforphl.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Chronic-Disease-and-Data-Modernization-%E2%80%93-Opportunities-and-Safeguards-For-Enhanced-Public-Health-Data-Collection.pdf>

To help close this gap, the CDC Foundation launched the Workforce Acceleration Initiative (WAI)—a program designed to help drive the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) ambitious Public Health Data Strategy to future-proof public health data systems. WAI’s innovative approach is simple: **quickly and competitively recruit top private sector tech talent** into roles at public health agencies across the country. And it works.

“Coming out of the pandemic, we accelerated our knowledge base in placing highly skilled individuals within public health agencies around the country,” said Michelle Panneton, WAI’s Director of Programs. “We were able to lean into some of those learnings to be adaptive and move rapidly to meet these needs.”

WAI’s Tech Hiring Success Story

Through WAI, public health agencies nationwide have successfully identified, interviewed and hired well-qualified candidates—and they’ve done it far faster than typical government hiring timelines. As of the end of 2025, 49 agencies participating in WAI have hired 125 mid- to senior-level tech and data professionals who are boosting the efficiency and quality of data modernization projects. What’s more, **9 out of 10 new hires came from fields outside of public health**.

“Our recruitment focused on bringing in individuals and expertise from the private sector and from outside public health because we do not have those skills in-house to take us into the future in terms of data modernization and data infrastructures,” said Pam Roesch, senior technical advisor in Evaluation

Here’s how WAI agencies are doing it.

WAI Helps Public Health Speak Tech

Conventional public sector recruitment approaches aren’t always visible, accessible or relevant to tech jobseekers. WAI works with public health agencies to:

Partner with expert recruiters. WAI links agencies with professional recruiters from the world of tech. These recruiters help reduce friction for agencies that aren’t already adept at hiring for tech roles. For example, they participate in recruitment intake and feedback calls to align agency needs and required candidate qualifications. They also advise on job description language and interview questions, effectively screen candidates based on technical skills and spot red flags, like AI-generated interview responses.

Create job descriptions that resonate. Typical government job descriptions lack the keywords tech candidates look for. That means promising candidates may skip over government postings—even when they may be a good fit. WAI has brought agencies and experts together to draft [core job descriptions](#) for industry-standard roles like business analysts, data engineer and product managers, translating government-speak into language that resonates with tech jobseekers.

Offer benefits that stand out. Salary gaps can put government agencies at a recruitment disadvantage compared to the private sector. But WAI has observed that benefits beyond compensation speak to tech talent. For example, of the candidates hired by participating public health agencies so far, nearly 2 out of 5 said they left their last role because they wanted more personally meaningful work, while 1 in 4 cited an interest in remote work. Tapping into these desires can help make public health a viable career path for professionals from the private sector and expand agencies' geographic reach to broaden the candidate pool.

Boost the pace of hiring. Tech companies tend to hire very quickly. That means candidates can disappear from the market before public health agencies even have a chance to connect with them. While government timelines can't always match those in the private sector, WAI found that it's often possible to speed up hiring while still working within public-sector policies and processes. WAI expedites hiring by trimming timelines and providing standardized interview guides and other resources. In fact, agencies that have participated in WAI to date have managed to fill half of their advanced technical positions within about two months of posting and 9 out of 10 positions within about three months — all while ensuring hires underwent in-depth technical reviews and agency interviews.

WAI Prioritizes a Strong Foundation

Hiring the right candidate starts long before the first interview is scheduled. WAI's approach helps public health agencies build organizational focus and appropriate processes to hire as effectively and efficiently as possible, now and in the future. Devoting the time to lay this strong foundation upfront not only helps to secure the right outcomes—it can also boost efficiency later in the hiring process, saving time and money.

Agencies that work with WAI:

Spend time preparing and planning. Before interviewing candidates, agencies and WAI consult with project managers, technical recruiters and planning advisors to identify the right technical roles to meet data modernization targets, gain a nuanced understanding of necessary skills and experience and optimize existing hiring processes to maximize the chances of finding the right match.

Pave the way by gaining buy-in. Securing buy-in from public health agency leadership and staff helps make it possible to quickly and effectively integrate new hires—especially talent coming from the private sector who may not be fluent in government ways of working. Getting this done doesn't look the same for every agency, but highlighting how tech talent can increase efficiency, add value and enable teams to do more with less can help.

Screen for technical skills early. Agencies working with WAI used a variety of interview methods to identify qualified talent, with mixed success. Early screening by an experienced tech recruiter quickly emerged as a best practice for identifying candidates who met a baseline of skills—conserving agencies' hiring resources and time.

Don't skimp on experience. When budgets are tight, hiring an early-career professional may seem like a simple, cost-effective solution. But that can mean missing out on the benefits mid- to senior-level professionals have to offer, like soft skills, advanced technical knowledge, experience in overcoming barriers and the ability to expertly scope and plan projects. WAI found that while more experienced candidates expect higher salaries, they also deliver higher value, more efficiency and higher quality. And that means faster, better progress on key tech infrastructure projects that can boost productivity across an agency.

Looking to Hire a Tech Professional? Use WAI's Blueprint

Here are key tips based on WAI's experience that any public health agency can adapt to access tech talent for data modernization:

- **Spotlight your mission.** Use storytelling to make your agency's "why" sing in postings and interviews. Help candidates see themselves making a real difference in people's lives by joining your agency.
- **Use the right keywords.** Review your job descriptions against private sector postings to identify key refinements. Make sure you're describing what your agency needs in language tech jobseekers understand.
- **Use an expert technical screener.** A technical screener has enough subject matter expertise to evaluate jobseekers' technical skills. Technical recruiters can do screening, but often, so can other staff with technical expertise. If your agency doesn't have relevant expertise in-house, you could consider partnering with a university or health care organization in your community or reaching out to another public health agency that's hired tech talent before.
- **Consider engaging a contractor.** Be sure your agency's hiring process includes a decision point: staff or contractor? Highly specialized, technical roles are often well suited to contractors, especially for discrete, time-bound deliverables. Contracting also typically involves shorter engagement timelines, helping agencies stay flexible and make the most of available resources. And many tech jobseekers are open to gig-style opportunities.
- **Offer remote work.** Tap into tech candidates' desire to live wherever suits them by making remote work a possibility. If agency leadership has concerns, highlight that remote work can unlock access to a much larger talent pool, boosting the chances that you'll find just the right match. You can also share management tactics that set remote staff—and the agencies that hire them—up to succeed, like clear performance expectations, accountability measures and consistent check-ins.

If funding limitations are putting the squeeze on hiring for your agency, consider these creative tactics to make your dollars go farther:

- **Build partnerships to fill gaps.** Consider reaching out to a tech company to ask if they can provide pro bono (free) or low-cost recruiting support. Look for university internship programs that can connect your agency with short-term tech expertise in return for job experience or mentorship.

- **Get tech input to guide strategy.** Involve tech and data staff in conversations about strategic and financial planning. They can advise on what's needed to maintain key tech functions and roles across projects and over time. That input can help your agency decide how and when to distribute funds among projects and departments.
- **Connect with other agencies.** Explore ways to share full-time tech employees across multiple agencies—or team up with a network of public health agencies to create a tech employee pool that can provide short-term support as data modernization needs arise.

Leverage WAI's evidence and resources. WAI has amassed data, resources and examples that can help you show the value of bringing tech talent into public health and make it a reality for your agency. Use what WAI has to offer to make the case for your agency's data modernization or tech hiring initiatives and to shape your recruiting materials.

"The CDC Foundation was well-placed for several reasons to take on this work," said Panneton. "We've served for many years as a convener of different types of partners, including the CDC, state and local governments, and other non-governmental organizations."

The Bottom Line: Bringing Tech Talent into Public Health Is Possible

As public health agencies transform their data infrastructure to keep pace with modern needs and get ahead of potential threats, recruiting the right workforce will continue to be a high-priority, high-impact investment. WAI proves that with the right approach, public health agencies can compete for and secure top talent to make this transformation a reality.

Learn more about WAI and explore innovative recruitment tools your agency can use at: <https://www.cdcfoundation.org/programs/workforceacceleration>