

FEATURE ARTICLE

Serving Communities, Shaping Systems: The Evolving Role of Public Health Nurses in the Philippines

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Abstract

Public health nurses (PHNs) in the Philippines play a vital role in advancing Universal Health Care and Primary Health Care by serving as frontline leaders in community engagement, health promotion, and policy implementation. Despite their contributions, they face persistent challenges, including workforce shortages, wage disparities, hospital-centric education, and fragmented governance. Drawing from a reflexive narrative of community-based practice and organizational experience, this article situated the evolving role of PHNs within broader health systems transformation. The National Association of Public Health Nurses, Inc. (NAPHNI) established a unified platform for advocacy, leadership development, and recognition of advanced practice roles. Policy reforms such as a National Nursing Workforce Plan, passage of the Comprehensive Nursing Bill, and competitive compensation were imperative to empower PHNs. Strengthening public health nursing was discovered to be crucial in achieving health equity and a resilient healthcare system in the Philippines.

Keywords: *Public health nursing; universal health care; primary health care; nursing workforce; health equity; nursing policy; Philippines*

Introduction

Public health nursing in the Philippines has long been at the intersection of service, advocacy, and system transformation. As the country continues to grapple with persistent inequities in health care access, the role of public health nurses has become increasingly critical in advancing Universal Health Care (UHC) and Primary Health Care (PHC) (University of the Philippines Manila, 2021; USAID HRH2030/Philippines, 2020). Positioned at the frontlines of communities, they provide direct care and lead in health promotion, policy implementation, and community empowerment. Yet, despite their vital contributions, the profession faces enduring challenges in workforce distribution, recognition, and support (Nurse Magazine, 2023). To better understand these dynamics, it is essential to situate public health nursing within both personal journeys of service and broader historical and policy contexts.

An Uncharted Personal Journey

Having graduated from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program in 1972, I brought the core value that my UP education had instilled in them—"Serve the People"—especially the poor and the marginalized. Considering the social context of that time, during Martial Law, I also pursued my interest in community health. I was led to work in communities where health services were needed most and then immersed myself in a movement desiring to transform the oppressive societal conditions that created the social and health inequities. This kind of socially responsive practice echoes the role of nurses as advocates for health equity and social justice (Johansen, 2021). After obtaining my master's degree in public health in 1978, I joined the Alay Kapwa Kilusang Pangkalusugan (AKAP) as a national

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nurse trainer. AKAP is a non-government organization that runs a Community-based Tuberculosis Program. I worked with doctors, nurses, medical technologists, and community organizers. Our project sites were in rural and urban areas with low socioeconomic status. Our team was armed with the principles and strategies of primary health care and we chose to believe that this is the best way to address determinants of health in order to bring health care closer to where people live and work (World Health Organization, 2016). We trained lay community health workers on health promotion, disease prevention, and management of common and simple health problems. We met with official and respected non-official leaders, ordinary individuals, and traditional healers.

Living with and learning from the people had enriched my life. It further allowed me to appreciate indigenous leadership and address the people's interests. Working through established traditional networks and facilitating empowerment through shared decision-making had reflected a community-centered approach that global health frameworks increasingly recognize as vital to sustainable health interventions (UNICEF, 2024).

For decades, I have stood by a conviction: achieving health equity requires unwavering political will to fortify primary health care and embed community-based strategies across every tier of the health system. The University of the Philippines Manila (2021) argues that this lens reveals nurses not merely as caregivers confined to clinical walls, but as agents of transformation—whose influence can ripple far beyond hospital corridors.

My ongoing journey with the Health Futures Foundation, Inc. (HFI), a civil society organization that designs and implements inclusive, equitable, and cost-effective healthcare programs in the Philippines, has reaffirmed this belief. Working alongside nurses embedded in the field has sharpened our competencies and broadened our understanding of grassroots realities, policy gaps, and structural constraints. Similar findings from health workforce development programs have shown that local empowerment and capacity-building are central to sustaining Universal Health Care reforms (USAID HRH2030/Philippines, 2020).

This article situated my personal experience within broader discourses on health systems transformation. It not only examined the strategic positioning of nurses but also identified insights and policy imperatives to empower public health nurses and enhance their practice in addressing the country's health equity challenges.

The Advancing Roles of Public Health Nurses

Public health nurses stand at the forefront of primary care delivery and community empowerment across the Philippines. They are the cornerstone of rural health units, city health offices, barangay health centers, and private health care facilities. As key enablers of Universal Health Care (UHC) and Primary Health Care (PHC), they play a unique and crucial role in implementing health initiatives, while also uniquely bridging multiple roles. They are often the first health professionals to engage with communities, particularly in rural and underserved areas. In addition, they also conduct epidemiological surveillance to identify the origins of diseases and identify health threats.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Badillo (2023) stated that PHNs were at the frontlines of contact tracing, home visits, and community health education. Despite the crisis, they sustained maternal and child health services, immunizations, and chronic disease management, while often improvising with limited Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and scarce supplies. Many had also offered emotional support to patients and families, while coping with stigma, heavy workloads, and personal risks.

Public health nurses' commitment to making healthcare more accessible to all Filipinos is commendable. They serve as coordinators in Primary Care Provider Networks to ensure continuity of care and referrals, and collaborate with barangay health workers in order to expand access to primary care services.

UNICEF (2024) reported that, during a surge of measles cases in Bangsamoro in 2024, nurses and midwives in Cotabato City rode motorbikes with vaccine carriers to reach remote sitios. They worked with barangay health workers and youth leaders to ensure children received MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) shots despite poor roads and security challenges.

In many barangays, PHNs bring people together through community assemblies - local officials, women's groups, faith leaders- to map out health priorities and design health action plans. Such partnerships foster trust while demonstrating people-centered care that involves respecting individual and community needs, preferences, and values as nursing practices are integrated in promoting a holistic, culturally sensitive, and equitable treatment.

Their leadership in health literacy programs inspires people to make informed decisions about their health and well-

being. Their efforts in conducting health needs assessments and community diagnoses, while also planning, implementing, and monitoring interventions that significantly improve health outcomes.

There are other advancing roles of the PHNs that are emerging. They now help craft local health ordinances, build referral systems, and develop health information systems that strengthen primary care. In a country vulnerable to typhoons and climate change, they had also taken on roles in disaster preparedness, psychological first aid, and climate-resilient health planning. Having embraced digital tools, they are beginning to use mobile apps and teleconsult platforms to monitor patients, deliver health education, and extend vital services to geographically isolated areas.

Discussions are moving toward institutionalizing advanced practice roles for public health nurses so as to empower them to elevate primary care, manage community health programs, and spearhead groundbreaking innovations in healthcare delivery.

Despite their vital contributions, public health nurses continue to face persistent problems that weaken the implementation and success of UHC and stall the transformation of healthcare systems.

Today's Crucible: Challenges in Public Health Nursing

Public health nurses face challenges in their workforce, education, policy, and practice. Recent data reveal a significant disparity between the nursing supply and community health needs. The Department of Health estimates a deficit of over 127,000 nurses, with a maldistribution of them, as only 13% serve in primary care facilities such as rural health units and barangay health centers that have resulted in critical service gaps in underserved communities (Statista, 2025). As of 2021, approximately 51% of licensed Filipino nurses (316,000) had left the country due to low pay, job insecurity, and limited career growth opportunities. In 2024, over 8,000 newly hired nurses were deployed for overseas employment (Statista, 2024).

The gaps in education and training are characterized by hospital-centric nursing programs that focus on hospital and clinical care, thereby leaving graduates ill-prepared for community-based public health work. Hence, opportunities for specialization and leadership in public health nursing, representing advanced practice pathways, remain limited (University of the Philippines Manila, 2021).

As of 2025, the monthly salary for nurses in public service, as per the Salary Standardization Law, ranges from PHP 36,619 (Salary Grade 15) to PHP 51,357 (Salary Grade 19) (Department of Budget and Management, 2021). Although this is something to be thankful for, salaries are still not competitive compared to those in neighboring countries since nurses in the country earn less than half of what their counterparts receive. For instance, public health nurses in Vietnam receive nearly 57% more than their Philippine counterparts, while Thailand gives over 100% more (Dumlao-Abadilla, 2020; Malasig, 2020; Hospital Management Asia, 2024). This wage disparity fuels migration and undermines morale and retention within the local healthcare system.

In addition, some public health nurses experience job insecurity due to their contractual arrangements under the Nurse Deployment Program. The limited career advancement also discourages long-term commitment to public health roles. Practice-level challenges include functioning in under-resourced settings, where limited supplies and personnel intensify the pressure of patient care. High population-to-nurse ratios overburden nurses in their efforts to provide quality care. Based on DOH data reported by Statista, as of 2023, there was one public health nurse for approximately 5,900 people and this data showed how such ratio is one of the lowest in Southeast Asia (Statista, 2025). In comparison, Thailand's public-sector nurse ratio (1:343) reflects much stronger frontline coverage in subdistrict health centers and health promotion hospitals (Hospital Management Asia, 2024).

Policy and governance barriers are also present, including fragmented UHC implementation, where coordination between national and local systems is weak. Local governments often lack the political will to prioritize public health nursing initiatives in some areas (Nurse Magazine, 2023). These significant challenges underscore the need for systemic reforms to reinforce the human resources and the environment in which nurses operate.

The Birth of a Unified Voice: National Association of Public Health Nurses, Inc. (NAPHNI)

The establishment of NAPHNI in the Philippines on December 1, 2021, was not merely an organizational milestone. Instead, it was a strategic and deeply motivated response to the evolving demands of public health and the nursing profession. At its core, NAPHNI emerged from a collective vision among nurse leaders to strengthen public health nursing, while directly supporting and advancing our country's development goals, particularly in Universal Health

Care, community empowerment, and health equity. Before NAPHNI's formation, public health nurses operated within disparate systems—local government units, national agencies, and non-government organizations (NGOs) that lacked a unified platform to advocate for their unique contributions to healthcare delivery services and professional development. Public health nurses sought to assert their identity that is distinct from their hospital-based roles, while emphasizing their expertise in population health, policy implementation, and community engagement.

NAPHNI was officially launched on April 6, 2022, during the NurseLEAD Summit at the Hilton Clark Sun Valley Resort in Pampanga. This event was co-hosted by the University of the Philippines Manila College of Nursing and had been able to bring together nurses from diverse regions and settings under a standard banner to share best practices, influence policy, and build a collective identity rooted in primary health care principles.

Members were united in the vision of having a healthy and empowered community and population through excellence in public health nursing practice and transformative leadership and governance. To achieve this said vision, members were called to advocate for and to work towards policies and systems that advanced public health nursing practice, thereby improving the health and social well-being of the Filipino people.

Since its birth, NAPHNI has held three national conventions and assemblies. The first convention 2023 focused on *"Positioning Public Health Nursing in Implementing Universal Health Care in the Philippines."* It brought together nurses from across sectors and settings to discuss and to explore strategies for strengthening the role of public health nurses as leaders in implementing the country's healthcare reforms toward universal health care.

The second National Convention (2024) had the theme *"Championing Social Determinants of Health towards Achieving Health Equity."* This gathering highlighted the role of nurses in addressing upstream factors, such as poverty, education, housing, and climate change. In 2025, the third convention theme, *"Advancing Public Health Nursing Practice in the Philippines,"* focused on developing Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) in public health, while being aligned with the Philippine Qualifications Framework Level 7 standards for career progression and specialization. The Convention encouraged nurses to take on strategic leadership roles, engage in policy advocacy, and serve as catalysts for transforming the healthcare system.

Charting the Path Forward: Policy Imperatives to Empower Public Health Nursing

In having recognized the full potential of public health nursing in helping shape a more equitable and more responsive healthcare system, the need for a robust policy framework emerged. Firstly, there is a need for legislation of a National Nursing Workforce Plan that addresses production, deployment, retention, and specialty mix of public health nurses. Such a plan, according to the USAID HRH2030/Philippines (2020), should use real-time data to forecast needs and enforce equitable nurse-to-population ratios across all regions.

Secondly, there is also a need to push for the passage of the Comprehensive Nursing Bill, which formally recognizes public health nurse practitioners and specialists. Moreover, the University of the Philippines Manila (2021) asserts that a career-track framework for advanced practice nursing in public health is nearly complete, which in turn, will drive health system innovation in order to ensure that communities have expert and culturally responsive leadership at the forefront of prevention, health promotion, and policy advocacy.

In terms of compensation and incentives, there must be a guarantee of hazard pay, rural allowances, and performance bonuses for nurses deployed in primary care settings. Contractual arrangements and short-term fixes for the nursing shortage should be stopped. Address inequitable nurse distribution to meet the WHO's threshold of 27.4 per 10,000 population (World Health Organization, 2016).

On the other hand, education and continuing development should also emphasize a holistic UHC approach that tackles social determinants of health, promotes health literacy, and fosters community participation which are all core tenets underscored by NAPHNI leadership at each convention (University of the Philippines Manila, 2021). Primary health care competencies must be embedded into nursing education to ensure that graduates are practice-ready and equipped to lead at the grassroots level.

Regarding governance and local health system integration, local government units must allocate a budget for nurse-led barangay health centers/stations with clear governance structures and PHN-specific line items in municipal health appropriations. For digital health infrastructure, interoperable electronic medical record systems must be mandated, while rural internet connectivity is subsidized, and mobile health toolkits for PHNs are provided.

On the Ground: Advice for Aspiring Community and Public Health Nurses

Starting your career in community and public health nursing begins with a genuine desire to understand the people and their culture you serve. Start by listening to their stories, their concerns, and their problems. Respect their local knowledge, values, and ideas. Attend community gatherings, health fairs, and neighborhood meetings to establish trust through your consistent presence. This foundation of respect and humility shapes every intervention you will design later on.

Conduct community assessments through observations, focus groups discussions, and interviews to identify genuine needs. Prepare and give clear health education by using stories, visuals, and everyday language that is accessible and relatable. Develop basic data literacy to collect, to analyze, and to utilize information effectively in order to guide your projects while demonstrating results.

Reach beyond your workplaces to form collaborative partnerships. Invite barangay health workers, local officials, NGOs, faith groups, and schools into the planning process. Involve community leaders in designing programs to ensure relevance and ownership. Sharpen your leadership skills in drafting policy briefs, negotiating budgets, and presenting clear recommendations.

Commit yourself to lifelong learning and adaptability. Stay informed about UHC reforms and local health ordinances. Pursue public health nursing, epidemiology, or health promotion certifications to deepen your expertise. Reflect regularly through journaling, peer feedback, and self-assessment to fine-tune your approach. Advance your professional competencies by attending conferences, webinars, and roundtables, so that your insights can inform and shape local and national health agendas.

Adopt innovative solutions to meet evolving challenges, such as telehealth check-ins, mobile data collection tools, or community chatbot pilots for health education. Apply proven intervention models—such as TB treatment strategies or sanitation campaigns—to fit local contexts.

Take care of yourself to sustain your work. Serving communities can be emotionally and physically taxing. Build a support network of peers and mentors who understand the realities of the field. Have regular rest days, mindfulness breaks, or brief walks between home visits to recharge and refresh. Watch for early signs of burnout—fatigue,

detachment, and irritability—and seek guidance before stress becomes overwhelming.

Reflections and Key Learnings

Looking back over the past fifty years, it is striking to note how many of the challenges faced by public health nurses remain with us today. The health situation in the Philippines continues to be marked by inequities, between urban and rural areas, between those who can afford care and those who cannot, and between the aspirations of health reforms and the realities of implementation. Yet, amid these persistent struggles, the role of nurses has never diminished; in fact, it has grown more vital.

The International Council of Nurses' slogan, 'We can lead the way,' resonates deeply with me. My passion is to continue making a difference to ensure that every Filipino, regardless of social status or geography, has access to quality and affordable health services. My passion to "make a difference" aligns with the UHC reform agenda in the Philippines, for it is through the dedication of health workers, especially nurses, that UHC can move from aspiration to lived reality, bringing us closer to a society where health is truly a right and not a privilege of a few.

In conclusion, public health nurses in the Philippines play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between communities and the healthcare system. By addressing challenges such as workforce constraints, resource limitations, wage disparities, and professional development, they can continue to strengthen health systems and improve health outcomes. Their role as leaders, advocates, educators, and innovators is indispensable in achieving a resilient and equitable health care system for all. Through NAPHNI's unifying platform—driven by bold advocacy, visionary leadership, and a deep commitment to excellence in practice, the promise of a "Healthy Philippines" is no longer distant; it becomes an achievable, collective triumph led by the nation's public health nurses.

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“Nursing knowledge expands not only through discovery, but through the courage to question what has always been assumed.”