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## Maryland association helps to advance state health commission

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Maryland Gov. Wes Moore, front right, signs a law creating the state's Commission on Public Health in May. He is surrounded by supporters, including commission co-Chair Oluwatosin Olateju, behind him.

Photo courtesy Office of Maryland Governor

Baltimore nursing professor Oluwatosin Olateju joined the Maryland Public Health Association in 2022 to learn more about advocacy “beyond the bedside.” She never dreamed that just one year later she would be standing right behind Maryland Gov. Wes Moore as he signed a landmark bill to establish a commission aimed at improving the delivery of public health services in Maryland.

“It was one of the best days of my life to know that I can be part of something greater than me, something that can transform people’s lives,” said Olateju, DrPH, MSN, co-chair of MdPHA’s Advocacy Committee and one of three co-chairs of the Maryland Commission on Public Health.

Signed into law in May 2023, the commission will make recommendations for improving public health services in Maryland, with a special focus on improving the delivery of the foundational public health services provided by the Maryland Department of Health and the state’s local health departments. Foundational public health services are defined by the Public Health Accreditation Board as the baseline of public health programs.

The new commission will also analyze the state’s ability to respond to major public health challenges and make recommendations for reform through work groups focused on funding, governance, organizational capabilities, workforce, data and information technology and communications and public engagement.

The new commission aligns with and enhances the mission of the Maryland association, said MdPHA President Jonas Nguh, PhD.

“We thank the governor so much for this initiative,” Nguh told *The Nation’s Health*. “We look forward to working alongside the commission to improve the delivery of public health services in Maryland.”

Maryland consistently scores well in national health rankings, said Olateju, an assistant professor of nursing at Coppin State University in Baltimore. But despite the rankings, the state’s public health facilities “have grappled with existing realities in governance, workforce, and other areas such as low salaries, recruitment, hiring challenges, and limited funding for public health programs even long before the COVID-19 pandemic.”

These realities continue to impact the state’s ability to achieve equitable outcomes, she said, adding that the pandemic further exacerbated some of those issues and underscored the need to establish

the commission.

In the months leading up to the commission’s launch, MDPHA’s Advocacy Committee weighed in on more than 33 bills, many of which were enacted into law, Olateju said.

Working closely with MDPHA Advocacy Committee co-chair Ilona Argirion, PhD, MPH, and other “astute and dedicated members of the Advocacy Committee,” Olateju helped to draft and submit written testimonies and also gave oral testimony in support of the bill before the Maryland General Assembly Health and Government Operations Committee.

The commission is required to submit a final report of its findings and recommendations to the Maryland General Assembly by Dec. 1, but Olateju hopes the commission will become permanent.

“Why should it sunset? Hopefully we can leverage support so that the commission can continue this important work beyond the stipulated timeline and become permanent,” she said.

For more information, visit <https://smchd.org/commissiononpublichealth>.

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[← Previous](#)

[Next →](#)

[^ Back to top](#)

### In this issue



[The Nation's Health](#)

[Vol. 54, Issue 2](#)

[April 2024](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[Table of Contents \(PDF\)](#)

[Index by author](#)

[Complete Issue \(PDF\)](#)



- Print
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- Email Article
- Citation Tools

- Share
- Post
- Like 0
- 

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