

ASTDD Health Impact Snapshot: Leadership Development and Peer Support



The Challenge

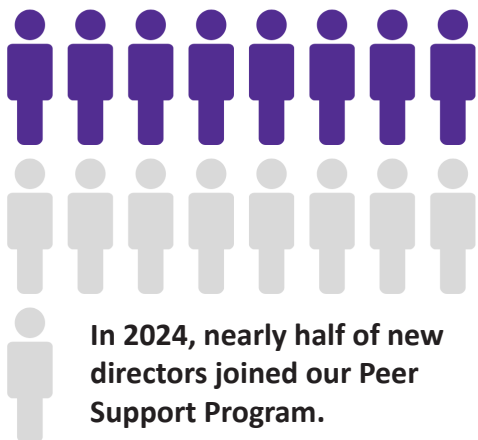
Strong leadership is the backbone of effective public health systems—and oral health is no exception. While the oral health of Americans has improved over the past six decades, deep disparities remain, and the need for capable, supported leadership in state and territorial oral health programs (S/TOHPs) has never been more urgent.

In 2024 alone, 17 states experienced a change in program leadership, following 15 changes in 2023. Nearly 60% of dental directors have held their position for fewer than five years. Educational backgrounds also vary widely: only 30 of 51 jurisdictions have a dentist in the role, and just seven of those also hold an MPH. Nine states report having two or fewer full-time staff dedicated to oral health, and one currently lacks a program altogether.

These figures highlight a critical need: **S/TOHP leaders must be equipped not only with technical knowledge but also with the mentorship, resources, and peer support systems needed to lead effectively** within increasingly complex public health environments.

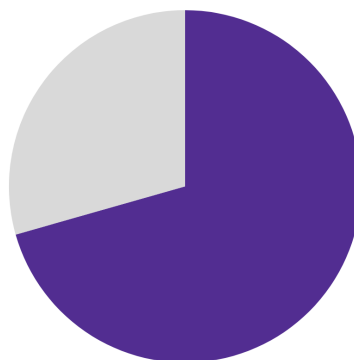
Building Leadership Through Public Health Collaboration

ASTDD plays a vital role in cultivating strong, capable leaders by offering a structured orientation, peer support, and ongoing professional development tailored to new S/TOHP directors and staff. These leadership offerings are part of ASTDD's broader commitment to strengthening the infrastructure of S/TOHPs—ensuring they have not only knowledgeable personnel but also the systems, partnerships, and data tools necessary to thrive.



Key Activities:

- **New Member Orientation:** When a new director is appointed, ASTDD hosts a welcome webinar to introduce them to the organization, key federal and national partners, and tools on the ASTDD website.
- **Peer Support Program:** New directors can opt into this yearlong mentoring program. We match each participant with a seasoned peer, and together they develop a technical assistance plan. Regular check-ins throughout the year allow them to exchange ideas, ask questions, and build confidence.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Participants complete a post-program evaluation to improve the experience for future cohorts.



In 2024, 12 of 17, or 70% of new directors completed orientation.

The Impact

The success of ASTDD's leadership development efforts is best captured in the words of those who've benefited from them. Through personalized support and the reassurance of peer connection, new directors gain both competence and confidence in their roles. Below are reflections from recent participants in the Peer Support Program:

These testimonials underscore the practical value of peer learning in navigating the real-world challenges of public oral health leadership. As workforce turnover continues, these connections are proving essential for continuity, confidence, and collective progress.

"The peer program is an invaluable asset to any new dental director. To know that there is someone available to answer questions and offer suggestions—and eager to do so—offers a tremendous feeling of confidence."

"I think the peer support program should be the 'first stop' for all new state oral health program directors."

"One of the benefits of the peer support program is the ability to share ideas and concerns with someone who understands."



Conclusion and Next Steps

Leadership development is not a one-time training. It's a process of connection, mentorship, and confidence-building. ASTDD's approach ensures that new directors are not navigating the complexities of their roles alone. By fostering a culture of shared learning and peer support, ASTDD helps create a stronger, more resilient oral health leadership network nationwide—one capable of driving sustained progress in oral health equity and systems improvement, even in challenging times.

