

Public Health, A New Career Direction for Nicolas Aguilera in Union County - written by Cayetana Gomez de Soler*



For nearly 3 years, Nick Aguilera, Public Health Outreach Coordinator with the Center for Human Development (CHD) for Union County has been helping strengthen public health efforts across Union County by building partnerships, coordinating outreach events, and connecting community members with important health resources. About a year ago, the role expanded to include Emergency Preparedness Coordinator, creating an opportunity to further support the community before, during, and after emergencies.

In this position, the focus is on building relationships that make Union County stronger. From coordinating outreach events to collaborating with local organizations, healthcare providers, and emergency response partners, the work centers on improving public health while helping the community prepare for unexpected challenges.

The path to public health wasn't a traditional one. After working in management at a local lumber facility, a career opportunity with Northeast Oregon Network (NEON) introduced a new direction for Nick. As a Training Facilitator, his work focused on healthcare workforce resilience, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Helping healthcare professionals access training and resources revealed how rewarding community outreach could be and ultimately inspired a career change from business management to public health.

Transitioning into public health presented a learning curve but it also provided valuable opportunities for growth and collaboration with experienced coworkers and community partners, including volunteers.

Volunteerism remains one of the most important components of emergency response in Union County. During severe weather events and other emergencies, volunteers help ensure essential services continue when resources are limited.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that only medical professionals are needed as volunteers. In fact, volunteers from all backgrounds play a vital role. Everyday community members help keep shelters and resource centers operating, allowing critical services to remain available when they are needed the most.

For Nick, one of the most meaningful experiences in his current role has been participating in emergency and preparedness exercises and drills. These events demonstrate the importance of collaboration and highlight strong relationships among local agencies, healthcare organizations, nonprofits, and volunteers. Working together before emergencies helps build a more coordinated response when challenges arise.

Above all, preparedness is a shared responsibility. While Union County has a relatively small volunteer base, its greatest strength is the willingness of organizations and individuals to work together, share resources, and support one another. That spirit of collaboration continues to make the community stronger, safer, and more resilient.

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