

Seattle City Council: Director Appointment Questions

Dr. Sandra J. Valenciano, Public Health – Seattle & King County

1. What drew you to public service and this important role?

Public service has always felt deeply personal to me. I grew up in a low-income household and experienced firsthand how inequities in education, housing, healthcare access, and economic opportunity shape long-term outcomes for individuals and communities. Those experiences instilled in me an early understanding that public institutions matter and that leadership within those institutions can profoundly impact people's lives. Throughout my career, whether in clinical medicine, public health, or academic settings, I have been motivated by the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to live a healthy and dignified life, regardless of zip code, race, income, or background.

What draws me specifically to the Director role is the opportunity to combine science, systems leadership, and community partnership at a moment when public health is both more visible and more essential than ever. Public Health – Seattle & King County has a national reputation for innovation, equity, and evidence-based practice, and I am energized by the chance to help steward that work during a period of significant opportunity and challenge. I view this role not simply as an administrative position but as a responsibility to build trust, communicate clearly, protect vulnerable populations, and strengthen the long-term health and resilience of our region.

2. What do you see as the biggest challenges facing Public Health – Seattle & King County over the next four years and what is your approach to addressing those? What are some metrics you would use to evaluate the agency's performance?

Over the next four years, I believe the largest challenges facing Public Health – Seattle & King County will include rebuilding and sustaining public trust, addressing persistent health inequities, modernizing public health infrastructure, responding to substance use crises, preparing for future emergencies in an increasingly complex environment, and advocating for the resources and needed capacity to meet these challenges. We are also operating in a time when misinformation spreads rapidly, workforce burnout remains a concern, and many of the underlying drivers of poor health lie outside the influence of the healthcare system. These challenges require not only strong scientific leadership but also humility, transparency, and collaboration across sectors.

My approach will focus on strengthening community trust through clear communication, enhancing accountability and ensuring stewardship of public funds, investing in workforce development and modern data systems, and deepening partnerships with healthcare systems, schools, housing agencies, substance use providers, and community organizations. I would prioritize measurable outcomes and continuous quality improvement. Metrics I would use to prioritize to evaluate our Department's performance include vaccination rates and communicable disease response times, overdose and substance use prevention indicators, maternal and infant

health outcomes, chronic disease disparities, workforce retention, food permit inspection timeliness, emergency preparedness readiness metrics, and indicators of access to health care services. Importantly, I would disaggregate data by race, geography, and socioeconomic status to ensure we are truly advancing equity rather than masking disparities within aggregate data.

3. How will you ensure that both Seattle City Council and King County Council priorities are delivered?

Ensuring alignment between Seattle City Council and King County Council priorities begin with strong communication, proactive relationship-building, and a shared commitment to transparency. Public health sits at the intersection of many systems, and the Director must be able to translate complex scientific and operational issues into actionable information for policymakers. I believe it is important to engage councilmembers early, communicate frequently, and provide clear, evidence-based recommendations that connect public health initiatives to measurable community outcomes.

At the same time, I recognize that city and county leaders may at times have differing perspectives. I will ensure that public health remains grounded in science while also understanding the practical realities of governance, budget constraints, and constituent concerns. I will maintain open lines of communication with council leadership and staff. Ultimately, successful alignment depends on building trust and demonstrating that public health is a collaborative partner committed to delivering meaningful results for residents across the region.

4. How will you ensure that the Public Health – Seattle & King County supports data driven and evidence-based approaches and decision making?

Data and evidence must remain foundational to every major public health decision. That means investing not only in strong epidemiologic and analytic capacity, but also, in the infrastructure and culture necessary to use data effectively across the organization. I would prioritize strengthening surveillance systems, improving interoperability between agencies and healthcare partners, and ensuring timely access to reliable, actionable information. Just as importantly, I would work to ensure data is translated into clear insights that can inform policy, operations, and community action.

Evidence-based decision making also requires humility and adaptability. Public health guidance must evolve when new evidence emerges, and we must be willing to evaluate what is working and what is not. I will promote a culture of continuous learning and quality improvement where staff are empowered to assess outcomes, test innovations, and refine strategies based on data. I also believe evidence should include both quantitative metrics and community-informed perspectives. Numbers matter, but so does lived experience. The strongest public health decisions emerge when rigorous science is paired with meaningful community engagement.

5. How would you modernize public health infrastructure?

Modernizing public health infrastructure requires investment in the workforce, technology, communications, and operational systems. Many public health agencies across the country continue to rely on fragmented data systems and outdated processes that limit speed, coordination, and responsiveness. I would prioritize strengthening data modernization efforts, improving interoperability with healthcare and emergency management systems, and expanding the use of real-time analytics to support rapid decision making.

Equally important is workforce modernization. Public health agencies need staff with expertise in data science, communications, behavioral health, informatics, and community engagement in addition to traditional public health disciplines. I would focus on recruitment, retention, leadership development, and partnerships with academic institutions to build sustainable talent pipelines. Finally, modernization also means improving how we engage the public. We continue to improve our communication strategies to make them even more culturally responsive, multilingual, digitally accessible, and capable of reaching communities quickly and credibly during both emergencies and routine public health work.

6. What opportunities do you see to improve public health in Seattle and King County?

Seattle and King County have tremendous strengths, including world-class healthcare systems, strong academic institutions, innovative community organizations, and a population that values public health. One major opportunity is to deepen integration across sectors such as housing, education, transportation, healthcare, and behavioral health. Public health outcomes improve when systems work together, and this region is uniquely positioned to model that kind of collaboration nationally.

I also see significant opportunity in deepening our work to advance upstream prevention efforts. We have the ability to invest even more intentionally in maternal and child health, behavioral health, chronic disease prevention, environmental health, and youth well-being before crises emerge. Expanding community partnerships and leveraging data more strategically can help target interventions where they are needed most. Additionally, major regional events such as the 2026 FIFA World Cup create opportunities to strengthen emergency preparedness infrastructure and showcase innovative approaches to population health and regional coordination.

7. Can you speak to the social determinants of health and the role of PHSKC can take in partnering with other institutions to address them?

The social determinants of health are among the strongest predictors of health outcomes. Factors such as housing stability, educational opportunity, income, transportation access, food security, environmental conditions, and systemic racism often shape health more profoundly than medical care alone. Public health agencies cannot, and should not, address these issues independently, but they play a critical leadership role in convening partners, aligning strategies, and ensuring that health equity remains central in policy discussions.

The role of public health is to serve as a scientific authority and a strategic convener across sectors, and Public Health – Seattle & King County is uniquely positioned to play this role. By bringing together and partnering with schools, housing agencies, healthcare systems, philanthropy, employers, and community-based organizations, the department can help align investments and interventions around shared outcomes. I believe public health should help bring data, equity frameworks, and prevention strategies into policymaking and broader civic decision making while also elevating community voices in those conversations. Sustainable improvements in health require long-term, cross-sector collaboration grounded in trust and shared accountability.

8. What are your specific plans to address unpermitted street food vending? What do you see as the proper balance between compliance education and enforcement actions?

Unpermitted street food vending is a public health issue, but it is also a broader economic and public safety issue, and it requires a balanced, practical, and culturally informed approach. For Public Health's part, food safety standards exist to protect the public from foodborne illness and other health risks, but enforcement strategies must also recognize that many vendors are operating to support themselves and their families, often within communities that have historically faced barriers to formal permitting systems.

My approach would prioritize education, outreach, and pathways to compliance first. That includes multilingual education campaigns, technical assistance, simplified permitting processes where appropriate, and collaboration with community organizations that can help vendors navigate regulations. Enforcement remains important, particularly when there are significant health risks or repeated noncompliance, but it should be proportionate and focused on protecting public safety rather than punitive action alone. The goal should be creating a system where safe participation in the local economy is accessible, understandable, and achievable while still maintaining strong public health protections. Public Health – Seattle & King County is part of the Seattle Inter-Departmental Team convened by the Mayor's Office and is working closely in partnership with Seattle agencies on this issue as it relates to the City of Seattle.