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# Building Access and Understanding of Law in Public Health Practice in Nebraska

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## Background

- Public health law can be an effective and useful tool to promote population health, but also to facilitate the work of health departments.
- There is very little research regarding the awareness and knowledge of law or the conscious use of law among the public health workforce.
- Both the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) and the National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO) collect information on legal counsel and services provided, but not a measure of how law is used in routine practice.

### Questions from PHSSR Research Agenda

- Public Health Agency Organization and Governance – How do the legal powers and duties of governmental public health agencies influence the effectiveness, efficiency, and outcomes of public health strategies delivered at local and state levels?
- Public Health Workforce Competencies – How do the skills and competencies of the public health workforce impact the effectiveness, efficiency, and outcomes of public health strategies delivered by this workforce?

## Specific Aims

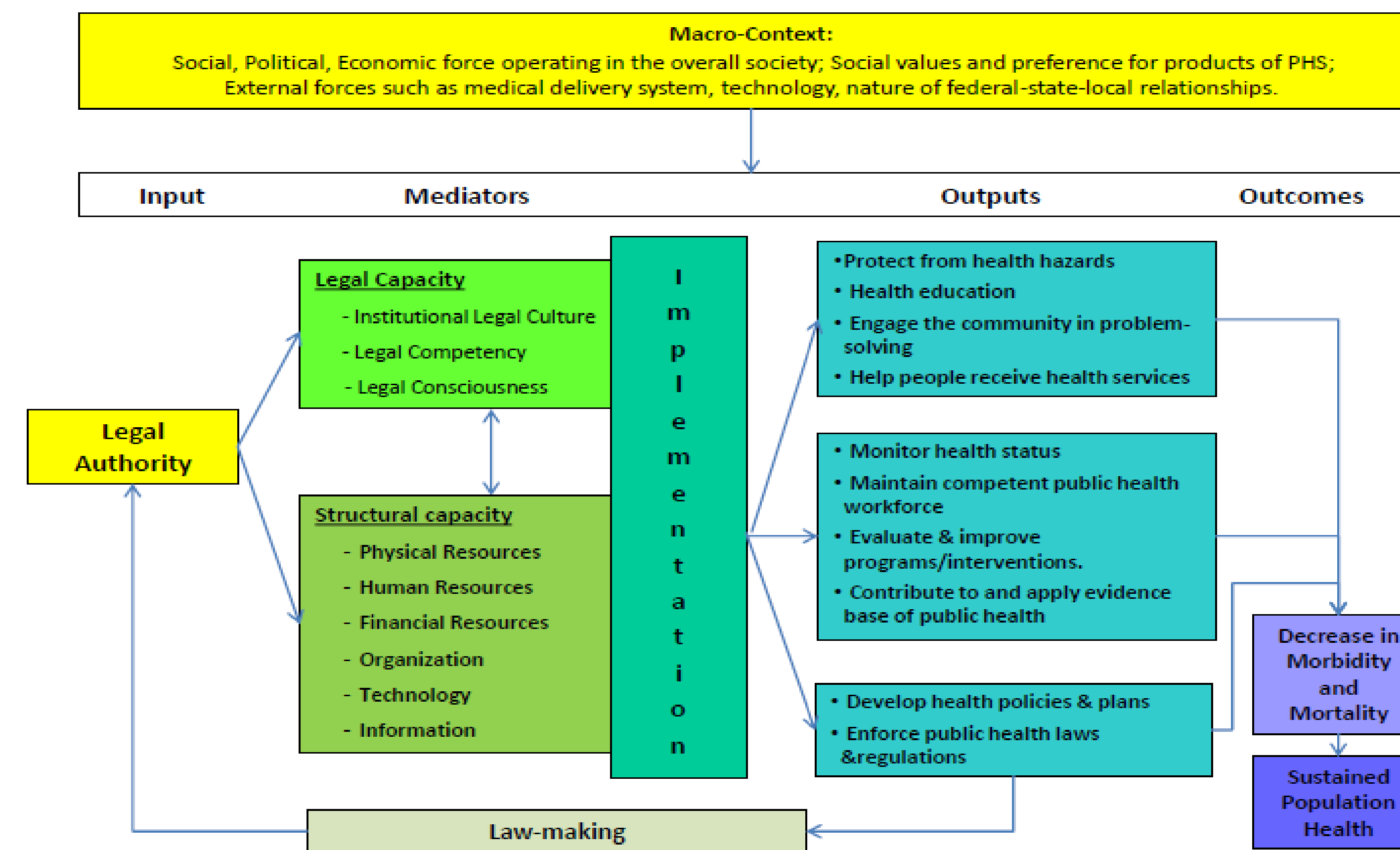
**Aim 1:** To systematically collect and code all state and local laws in Nebraska that govern the authority of public health agencies at the state and local level to perform essential public health services.

**Aim 2:** To create an online policy surveillance system that allows the public health workforce in Nebraska to readily access the laws that govern public health activities in Nebraska.

**Aim 3:** To evaluate changes in perceptions of law and the use of law by the public health workforce in Nebraska as a result of using the online policy surveillance system.

**Aim 4:** To conduct an evaluation of the impact of a particular set of legal provisions on public health agency performance and population health by integrating the policy surveillance system with existing longitudinal surveillance databases.

## Theoretical Framework



## Data Collection

- The Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services has a collection of public health laws that govern agency authority to act that serves as the starting point of data collection. We are building upon this wealth of information through a systematic search process in Westlaw and LexisNexis.
- Using the LawAtlas policy surveillance system (lawatlas.org), we are systematically coding key provisions of each law including date of enactment, effective date, enforcement, exemptions, penalties and fines, and other provisions related to specific areas of law.
- The laws are being double coded, with inter-rater reliability checks to ensure quality.
- The coding process creates a research-ready legal dataset that will facilitate legal evaluations of public health agency performance as well as population health outcomes.

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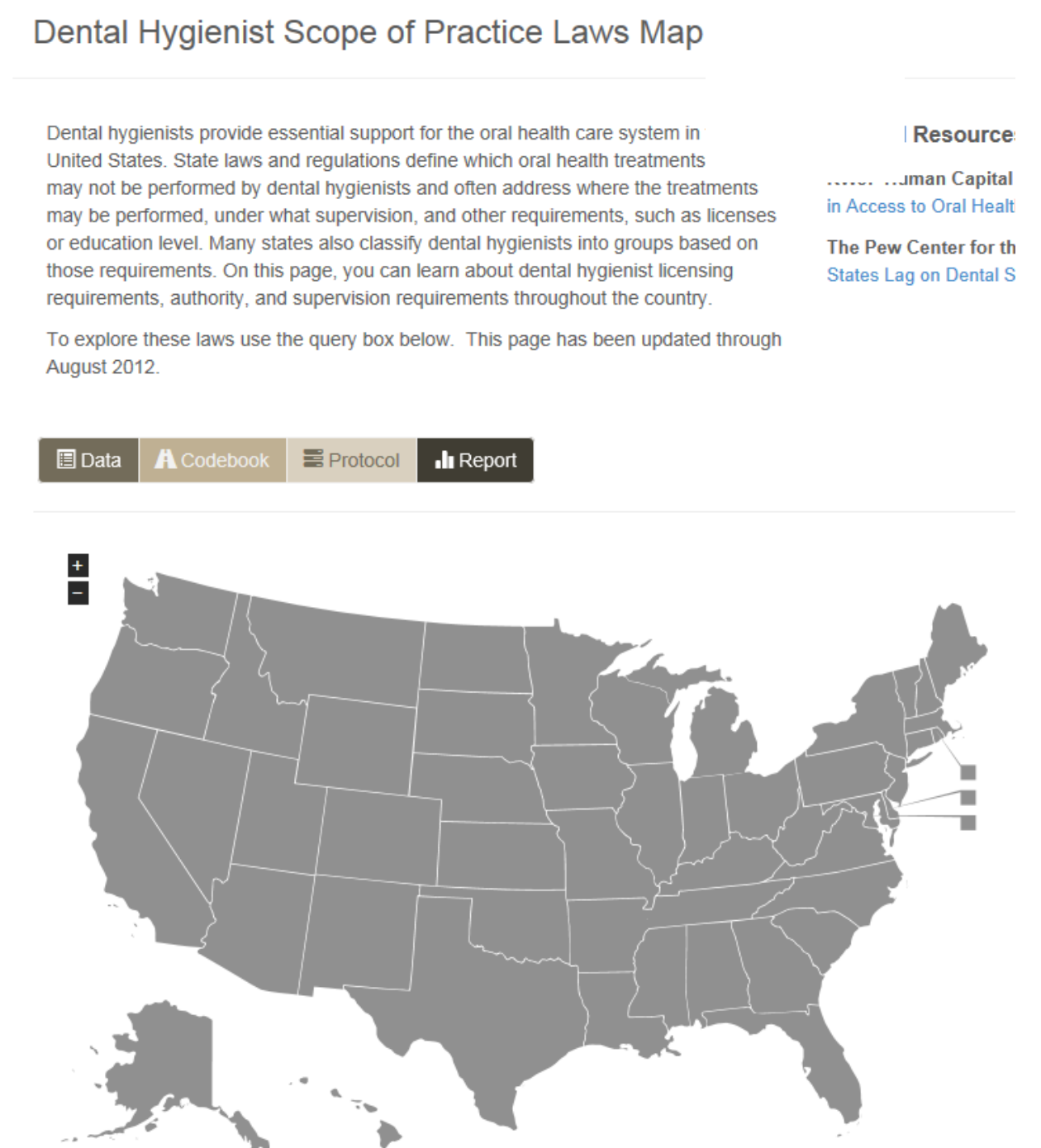
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## Progress to Date

- The dataset includes laws at the state, county and municipal levels.
- Topic areas include, but are not limited to: agriculture, environmental health, emergency powers, health occupations and professions, mental health, nutrition, substance use (alcohol, tobacco and other drugs), vaccination and many other areas.
- By coding the laws that govern legal authority to act by the public health workforce, we will create an interactive user-friendly map that will allow public health practitioners to see the current state of law.
- The map shown here is a representation of the online system. One of the final products for this project is the interactive map of Nebraska that will include county level options, not the state level options shown here.



## Implications for Practice

- By making the laws more accessible, the public health workforce can more easily become knowledgeable about their authority to act, which can facilitate the delivery of essential health services.
- By improving the delivery of health services, we hope to see improvements in population health outcomes, both in terms of behavioral and environmental changes.
- The current study will also help to advance our knowledge regarding the legal consciousness of public health practitioners.

## Contact Information & Acknowledgements

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