BOSS HEALTH

When it comes to keeping communities safe and healthy, graduates of Southern's public health programs are leading the charge as area health directors.



By Natalie Missakian

AS the first full-time health director in Westbrook, Conn., in more than a decade, Sonia Marino, '09, M.P.H. '14, is working to develop a community health plan that could touch on everything from opiate dependency and emergency preparedness to outdoor activities for children.

"Public health is my passion," says Marino, who took the job in January 2015, replacing a part-time director. "It's not just about wells and septic and food. It's so much more."

Marino envisions a forward-looking health department for her town, with public education and prevention programs, and social media campaigns tailored to the community's needs.

She credits Southern, where she earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees in public health, for shaping her comprehensive approach and for providing the broad background she needs to deal with the numerous issues that come across her desk, from landlord-tenant conflicts to restaurant inspections.

"The professors are great," says Marino. "I had a wonderful relationship with all of them."

Marino is one of about 20 Southern alumni now serving as health directors across Connecticut's 74 local health agencies. Many more hold jobs as deputy directors and sanitarians — the latter, a public health worker with knowledge of environmental and public health issues such as food protection, water quality, product safety, and more.

Peggy Gallup, professor of public health and coordinator of the undergraduate program, says she was contacting Connecticut health directors for a project recently and was struck by how many she recognized as former students.

Professor of Public Health William Faraclas says producing graduates who would lead local health efforts in the state was a dream of founders who launched the program in 1980.

"We dreamed big and our dream came true," says Faraclas, who chaired the department for 33 years.

Southern's was one of the first undergraduate public health programs in the United States when it began, Faraclas says, and it continues to serve as a national



As director of the Westbrook Health Department in Connecticut, Sonia Marino, '09, oversees public health for more than 6,900 residents.

model. The Master of Public Health program — state law requires local health directors to have the degree — was added at Southern in 1990.

While many graduates work in hospitals or non-governmental organizations, Southern graduates are particularly suited for jobs in local health departments because of the program's strong focus on community-based aspects of public health.

Meanwhile, hands-on programs, such as the popular two-week field study trip to Guatemala, foster the resilience and "roll-up-your-sleeves" attitude needed for jobs in public service.

Students must also complete an internship that takes them to the front lines of public health practice, says Faraclas.

It was an internship during his senior year at Southern that launched Robert Rubbo's career with the Torrington Area Health District in 1996. Two decades later, he is running the place.

After graduation, Rubbo, '96, M.P.H. '02, was offered a position as a sanitarian trainee and worked his way up, becoming a sanitarian, deputy director and, in 2013, the director.

Comparing notes with colleagues who attended other schools, Rubbo says he realizes how much Southern stands out in terms of quality.

"I really feel like they have one of the more challenging M.P.H. programs out there," Rubbo says.

Gallup notes Southern's relationship with local health departments is reciprocal. Health directors often email her if they are looking for interns or resources for projects.

One graduate student worked with a health department to survey pediatricians about their lead-screening practices for young children; another created a brochure on healthy homes and household environmental hazards. In Westbrook, Marino says Southern students have helped her conduct a community health assessment in town.

Maura Esposito, '90, M.P.H. '11, director of the Chesprocott Health District, which covers the towns of Cheshire, Prospect, and Wolcott, says she recently had several Southern students working for her as interns, and would love to work with more.

"I take Southern interns all the time because I know the program, and I know the quality of work that is expected," Esposito says. In return, she gives them plenty of opportunities to work in the trenches.

"Anybody who comes through my department should be able to get a really good job," she says. ■