

## President's Message

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# President Obama's Inaugural Address and NEHA

**L**ike many people, I listened to President Barack Obama's inaugural address. As I listened, I felt that much of what he said was relevant to NEHA, its members, and the profession of environmental health.

As with America, NEHA will carry on in these difficult times "not simply because of the skill or vision" of the leaders of the organization, but because the leaders and members have remained faithful to our founders' vision, which is "to advance the environmental health and protection professional for the purpose of providing a healthful environment for all." This is a noble and worthwhile vision and must not be lost in these difficult times.

Clearly, times have changed, and they continue to change. Our challenge is to adopt that change and adapt to it to keep the vision alive and meaningful to our members and the profession. As I write this, it is almost 44 years to the day that I began my career in environmental health, or, as it was called then, sanitation. The changes in that time have been enormous, from little things, like not having to use carbon paper in the inspection forms, to moving to NCR paper in the forms, to being able to print computer-generated forms in the field; to large things, like codes that are more science-based and the addition of new programs such as hazardous materials, sustainability, built environment, and all the programs that have developed as a result of the events of September 11, 2001.

When I began my career, *no* women worked in this field! We were required to wear coats and ties all the time. I remember the first, and only, time that I caught my tie in a barbed-

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wire fence while doing a preliminary inspection for an on-site sewage disposal system! Not only were we all male, but we were virtually all American-born, and primarily white. Few of us spoke any language other than American English. The demographics of the profession have changed, along with the demographics of the population that we serve.

We didn't have copy machines, faxes, GPS systems, or computers. We used 35 millimeter cameras or Polaroid cameras. We didn't have digital cameras. All our files were paper and had to be filed by hand, and data had to be hand collected and calculated. We didn't have calculators, and I remember speeding up the data calculation process by doing the calculations on a slide rule, rather than long division by hand!

Organizationally, virtually all of us were in health departments, under the jurisdiction of a health officer who was medically trained and often knew little, if anything, about "sanitation." In California at least, most environmental health departments now work in agencies that are separate from the traditional health department.

All of these changes have brought with them challenges, most of which have been overcome, and we continue on. The current changes, primarily the economic conditions that are developing, will necessitate some new thinking and work to deal with the challenges that they present.

Rather than sit and wait for something to be "done to or for us," we need to seize this opportunity to help develop a new paradigm for environmental health. Environmental health is at the forefront of the prevention and protection aspects of the public's well-being. When we do our jobs, enormous amounts of savings accrue because illness and disease do not have to be expensively treated. We're proof of the adage: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

As President Obama said, "Our time of standing pat, of protecting narrow interests and putting off unpleasant decisions . . . has surely passed." We need to work to help our legislators re-create government at all levels. We need to let them know of the true value that environmental health brings to our citizenry.

We need to demonstrate that we're an essential part of government—a part that works and makes lives better for Americans, for a relatively small cost.

As President Obama pointed out, although the challenges may be new, the values upon which our success depends are the tried-and-true values—hard work, honesty, courage, fair play, tolerance, curiosity, loyalty, and patriotism.

The new paradigm may include such things as separating environmental health from traditional health agencies or public health departments; developing funding mechanisms, such as fees for service that don't rely on dwindling general fund monies; and forming linkages with other governmental and nongovernmental agencies. It's not just about

our jobs, it's about our desire to preserve and protect the environment for the populations that we serve.

NEHA is working to keep itself viable and expand services to its members and to the profession so that they are well equipped to deal with the monumental changes that are sure to happen over the next months and years.

I can't express too strongly that NEHA has developed a reputation among governmental agencies and nongovernmental agencies as a reliable, trusted organization representing the field of environmental health. NEHA will be at the table as discussions are held

regarding the future course of environmental health.

NEHA is also prepared to face the economic difficulties that may be coming our way. We realize that we must remain economically sound so that we can provide the training and assistance that our members and profession need in these challenging times.

We have a proud and honorable profession that serves the public well, and we will persevere. 🐛

*Dick Pantano*

# **GREAT**

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