

President's Message

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The Environmental Health Workforce—NEHA's Workforce Development Committee

Introduction

When I ran for second vice president of NEHA, one of my platform items was “workforce development.” Subsequently, I volunteered to chair the NEHA workforce development committee, which I have been privileged to do for the past several years. Workforce development is very important to the overall health, vitality, and longevity of our profession. NEHA has to be committed to identify and address issues that affect the environmental health workforce. Soon, I will turn over the chairmanship to another NEHA board member, but I will continue to support NEHA workforce development efforts. In this column I will present the progress of the NEHA workforce development committee and the proposed approach that it has identified to address environmental health workforce development needs and issues.

The Need

As I began to explore environmental health workforce development, a few issues immediately became evident. One issue is the source of our future environmental health workforce, i.e., the “pipeline.” I served on eight Crumline Consumer Protection Award juries and have reviewed 30 or more applications. It was not uncommon to see descriptions of environmental health and food safety programs throughout the nation taking innovative approaches to acquire people to work in food safety and other environmental health programs. One example is that they would hire individuals with little or no environmental health academic education, but usually with some type of science background, and

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provide them with a variety of short courses and on-the-job training to teach them what they needed to know in order to function in environmental health.

Thus, *we need to increase the number of college students who major in environmental health* at institutions with accredited environmental health programs. Our colleagues in academia, the Association for Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP), and the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) are doing a very good job in my opinion to increase the number of students coming into the major. In fact, at our last NEHA board meeting, the AEHAP/EHAC executive director reported that student enrollment in environmental health programs is increasing nationally. While this trend is encouraging, even with the increase, there are vast areas of the U.S. that do not have colleges or universities with environmental health

programs. A question that I still have is, how will such a trend of increasing students satisfy the need for trained environmental health professionals nationally? This takes me to my next workforce development issue.

We need to know the number of people who are employed in environmental health positions. If we do not know this, then how will we know when we have sufficient numbers of environmental health majors to fill workforce needs? During my research, I never was able to find a definitive number. The most recent survey that I reviewed focused on the public health workforce and was conducted in 2007 by the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO). They estimated that within the public health workforce, there were about 9,000 environmental health workers. This number, however, only reflected people associated with state health departments. This survey did not identify environmental health workers in programs that are outside of health departments, e.g., a department of environment, department of environmental quality, or similarly named organization. Also, those in the federal sector, private industry, academia, and the uniformed services were not counted. Thus, *there is a current need for a comprehensive enumeration of the environmental health workforce*. The survey did, however, identify major areas of concern for the public health workforce, including the environmental health workforce, e.g., an aging workforce, a continuing worker shortage, and barriers in overcoming the crisis (budget constraints, noncompetitive wages, lack of visibility of the profession, etc.).

From time to time I search the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics Web site and find nothing descriptive for "environmental health" or "sanitarian." I do find entries for "environmental scientists and hydrologists" and "environmental scientists, including health," but their descriptions do not look like the profession that I know as environmental health. When I do these searches I also am reminded about the many job titles and descriptions that exist for our profession. In the past, it has been recognized that there is a need to define our profession, and that need still exists. Environmental health is a dynamic discipline and profession that constantly changes to meet the needs of populations and protect public health as our communities, the nation, and the world evolve. In fact, I think *given the dynamics of the discipline, the environmental health profession needs to be redefined, or at least reviewed to consider redefinition, periodically (maybe every 5–10 years).*

The Approach

During my career as a military officer, I tracked my rank and technical knowledge progression based upon published U.S. Army career paths that show recommended chronological advances in types of assignments, leadership responsibilities, military and civilian education and training, and the rank. I think a similar approach can be used to plan the progression of environmental health workforce development. We can identify and address four chronologically successive areas in the environmental health profession: elementary and secondary (grade school) education, the college/university years, junior to midcareer years in the workforce, and the years as leaders in the workforce and profession.

NEHA Environmental Health Workforce Development Committee

My first order of business was to form the NEHA workforce development committee. Several other NEHA board members volunteered for this effort, including current Vice President Brian Collins, Regional Vice President (RVP) Alicia Enriquez, RVP Bette Packer, and RVP David Riggs. Additionally, it seemed like a good idea to acquire the assistance of other environmental health professionals who have complementary experiences and skills that would enhance the committee's capabilities. Thus, Dr. Carolyn Harvey (professor, Eastern Kentucky University),

Captain Michael Herring (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Environmental Health [CDC/NCEH]), and Executive Director Yalonda Sindé of AEHAP/EHAC were asked to support and provide their expertise to the committee.

The NEHA workforce development committee is charged to monitor the state of the national environmental health workforce; periodically inform the board about environmental health workforce issues, trends, and needs; recommend where NEHA can provide guidance and assistance to improve the environmental health workforce; and provide guidance and assistance on national environmental health workforce issues. Also, the committee is to identify ways to collaborate with other committees, work groups, and organizations with similar or complementary environmental health workforce development projects and initiatives, and partner with CDC/NCEH in their efforts to promote the development of a competent and effective national environmental health workforce as recommended in the CDC publication, *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services*. The current committee objectives are to identify the issues and possible courses of action to define the environmental health profession, and to enumerate the environmental health workforce. Also, the committee is to elucidate workforce development dynamics, issues, and needs by focusing on the target areas of pre-college education (middle school through 12th grade), college and university education, employment (the workforce), and environmental health leadership.

The committee is organized into six teams, as follows:

- the "Define the Environmental Health Profession" team has an initial task of identifying how it will approach the problem of defining the environmental health profession and professional;
- the "Enumerate the Environmental Health Workforce" team has an initial task of identifying how it will approach the problem of enumerating the environmental health workforce;
- the "Pre-College Education" team has the initial tasks of expanding the areas of concern and interest beyond those discussed above and to start identifying how the team will approach the problem of influencing pre-college education about environmental health in a way that will increase the number

of people who are interested in and pursue a career in environmental health;

- the "College and University Education" team has an initial task of identifying areas of concern and interest and to start identifying how the team will approach the problem of influencing college and university environmental health education in a way that will increase the number of people who major in and pursue a career in environmental health;
- the "Employment (the Workforce)" team has an initial task of expanding the areas of concern and interest beyond those discussed above, and to start identifying how the team will approach the problem of influencing and enhancing the environmental health workforce; and
- the "Environmental Health Leadership" team has an initial task of expanding the areas of concern and interest beyond those discussed above, and to start identifying how the team will approach the problem of influencing environmental health leadership to enhance the environmental health workforce.

A lot needs to be done to develop the environmental health workforce. In order to be successful, however, the approach has to be comprehensive and address the full spectrum of the profession. I think we have established a good foundation for the NEHA workforce development committee. We selected talented individuals to form a committee to identify and address workforce development needs and issues, and I thank them all for taking on this task. We identified some initial workforce development needs and identified an approach to allow NEHA to start addressing those needs. Obviously, this approach intersects with other critical issues that affect our profession, for example, marketing the profession and environmental health leadership. Other NEHA efforts address these issues, so it will be necessary for the workforce development committee to coordinate and even collaborate on mutual efforts.

Let's continue to identify workforce development issues, put programs and resources in place to address them, and help move our profession into the 22nd century. No matter how difficult this may be, let's LEAN FORWARD! 🐻

