

NEHA NEWS

A Tumultuous Time in Washington, DC

By Joanne Zurcher (jjzurcher@neha.org)

Summer 2018 is right around the corner and NEHA's Government Affairs realizes that the 2018 midterm elections will be here before we know it. We want you to be prepared and informed as your elected leaders reach out to you this summer/fall and ask for your vote. It's been a frenetic time in Washington, DC, and NEHA has been hard at work to protect and promote the environmental health profession with our nation's governing and thought leaders. We thought it would be beneficial to our members to provide a synopsis of the past year and the activities we've undertaken (and are undertaking) on behalf of the profession

As with any new administration, there are bumps in the road as the transition from campaigning to governing begins. New positions need to be quickly filled, and many must be confirmed by the U.S. Senate. There were many other challenges with the current administration as distractions to governing seemed to come hourly through Twitter.

A new Congress began in 2017 and for the first time in a decade, all three branches of government were controlled by one political party. The budget battles of 2016 continued as the 13 appropriations bills necessary to keep the federal government running were not passed. Instead, the federal government was operating under a continuing resolution (i.e., the previous year's funding is continued until a specific new date and at that time, Congress must pass the 13 bills). NEHA worked tirelessly to ensure that funding for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), especially the National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, was kept off the political chopping block of federal funding.

NEHA worked to secure \$1.1 billion for Zika funding in the previous Congress and began 2017 by trying to influence the release of funds from CDC as soon as possible to address the growing public health risks related to the disease. State and local environmental health departments were facing challenging times to increase vector control capabilities and stop Zika from spreading, and this funding was critical to support their efforts.

Good news came early in 2017 as our champion for environmental health in Congress, Representative Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan), reintroduced HR 1909, the Environmental Health Workforce Act. The purpose of the bill is to ensure the requirement of a credentialed environmental health workforce in all states. Garnering support for this legislation has been a top priority for NEHA since we opened our Washington, DC, office.

NEHA then hosted its first ever Hill Day in Washington, DC, on February 13, 2017. NEHA's national officers came to Washington, DC, to meet with representatives and senators from both political parties to discuss the importance of environmental health, as well as highlight concrete solutions to pressing issues such as the passage of the Environmental Health Workforce Act. Information

about the 2017 Hill Day was posted on NEHA's website at www.neha.org/node/58882.

Budget battles continued till May 2017, when the Fiscal Year (FY) 2017 Omnibus Appropriations bill was passed. Fortunately, CDC programs were not cut as originally proposed in the president's first budget. CDC received \$7.16 billion in funding. Immediately following the passage of FY2017 appropriations, the budget battles for FY2018 began in earnest.

On July 10, 2017, Senator Deborah Stabenow (D-Michigan) welcomed everyone to the NEHA 2017 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in Grand Rapids, Michigan, through a video and Representative Lawrence gave an outstanding keynote address to our members.

Additionally, NEHA began working with over a dozen critical national public health partners to begin the conversation about the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Reauthorization Act. This legislation directs the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Preparedness and Response at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on what to do during a national crisis and who should be involved in the response. Environmental health is not mentioned in previous versions of the bill. As such, environmental health has not been funded during critical response times and has not been considered in the preparation for these incidences. NEHA has become a critical stakeholder on this issue and has met with the Assistant Secretary of Preparedness and Response on our work. As of this writing, the national public health partners now support the inclusion of environmental health in the legislation and NEHA has briefed the bipartisan group of senators working to draft this important legislation.

The devastating hurricane season in summer 2017 found environmental health on the cover of every newspaper again. The devastation and recovery efforts were nonstop due to the three massively destructive hurricanes that occurred—Hurricane Harvey in Texas, Hurricane Irma in Florida, and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. NEHA immediately began assessing immediate and long-term needs from our members in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. We then began work to ensure that federal funding was available to those areas. It took a lot longer than it should have, but \$89.3 billion was finally appropriated. CDC received \$200 million and we continue to work with CDC to get that money out to the most in-need areas.

Looking now to the present, FY2018 budget battles still continue and we don't have a budget. Congress, after two shutdowns and many continuing resolutions, did agree to raise the caps on both nondiscretionary funding (military funding) and discretionary funding (all other federal funding).

President Trump has released his budget for FY2019 and while many in Washington, DC, have not taken it very seriously, at least the process has begun for next year. Thus, before we finish the budget battles for 2018, we are already working on next year's budget.

Finally, NEHA is hosting its Second Annual Lobby Day on Capitol Hill on May 1, 2018. The entire NEHA board of directors will be coming to Washington, DC, to meet with representatives and senators to discuss improving environmental health and protecting the profession that saves lives and money every single day. A summary of the event will be published in the July/August 2018 *Journal of Environmental Health*. Please visit NEHA's website at www.neha.org for more information about the event.

Whew, what a roller coaster this past year has been. NEHA's Government Affairs will continue to represent you in Wash-

ington, DC, to ensure that the environmental health profession always has a seat at the table, as well as stays off the proverbial chopping block. With midterm elections coming up, if you happen to talk to your congressional representatives, make sure you ask them, "What are you doing to support the environmental health profession?" I would love to hear what they say and ask that you contact me with their response at (202) 270-6193 or jzurcher@neha.org. It is truly my honor to work for you and our noble profession. 🐜

Did You Know?

If looking for foodborne outbreak environmental assessment training and resources, this video (www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah8i0zuzw7I&feature=youtu.be) is a guide to navigating trainings and resources on environmental assessments conducted as part of foodborne illness outbreak investigations. The video summarizes trainings and tools from NEHA, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Colorado Integrated Food Safety Center of Excellence. After watching the video, you will be able to identify the environmental assessment resources that meet your training needs and the needs of your environmental health team. More information can be found at www.neha.org/eh-topics/food-safety-0/environmental-assessments-and-training.

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and largely self-sustaining communities with greenhouses and canneries. In the early 2000s, I visited one of the many hundreds of urban gardens in Havana, Cuba. These community gardens were created as a matter of desperation in the aftermath of reduced Soviet Union economic subsidies. Many of these gardens produce over two dozen different varieties of organic vegetables. Fresh, homegrown, and nutritious food at an affordable price.

There are many benefits to small farms and community gardens beyond healthy and nutritious food. A review of published literature suggests that they offer a focal point for community organizing, which can help address other concerns such as lead paint and safe walking routes to schools. Children can practice their math skills and learn where food comes from, such as I observed in post-Katrina New Orleans. In fact, the local school district introduced the idea of an



Mexican shaving bush tree. Photo courtesy of Angela Dyjack.

edible schoolyard, a concept they imported from schools in San Francisco. Participating schools in New Orleans promoted healthy eating by encouraging children to grow their own crops on school property. After harvest, the children were taught how to prepare and cook meals with the vegetables. These were nutritionally rich meals to which children might not otherwise have access. School-

based gardens represent an inexpensive activity that bring our children closer to nature and create opportunities for students to interact with each other in meaningful and physically productive manners.

Nayarit is not the only study in contrasts I've reflected on over the last few days. In recent history, America has supported policies that have incentivized large corporate farming over smaller family operations. Undoubtedly, economies of scale provided by large agribusiness have their advantages at the grocery store cash register. At the same time, small urban farms and community gardens provide a multitude of benefits to the places where we live and raise our families. Less greenhouse gases, less processed food, and more nutritious delights all realized in our local communities. That's a whale of a deal. 🐜

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