

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Environmental Health Is Hyperlocal—The Many Flavors of Environmental Public Health

As I reflect on working in environmental health for the past 35+ years, I am regularly reminded of how good environmental health professionals are at responding to emerging issues. This responsiveness is especially evident at each National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) affiliate conference I have attended. When new hot issues come to our state or community, environmental public health professionals often embrace the challenge as leaders or as contributors to a larger community of public health response leaders. We are often limited not by knowledge or ability but by funding. I have proposed in the past—sometimes more seriously than others—that environmental health budgets should include 10% to 20% for new and ongoing funding for staff to deal with the environmental health issues of the day and to ensure there is the capacity to manage the near-constant demands on our programs.

Over the years these issues have included, to just name a few:

- Leaking underground storage tanks and the emergence of leaking tanks containing methyl tert-butyl ether (MTBE) in areas where oxygenated fuels were required to address ozone air pollution issues
- Illegal hazardous waste dumping and the ongoing cleanup of hazardous material spills and waste sites
- Household chemical waste management
- Indoor air quality
- Consumer product safety investigations
- Radiator shop lead exposure assessments
- Use of GIS to map and address a range of issues such as old landfills and vectors

By adopting a proactive and collaborative approach, local environmental health programs can address hyperlocal and global challenges in the face of evolving environmental threats.

- Emergence of West Nile virus and its random resurgence in communities
- Emergence of the Zika virus, *E. coli* O157:H7, and the range of potential causative agents of foodborne illness (e.g., seasonal norovirus)
- Cannabis (e.g., medical use, recreational use, hemp)
- The Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act
- Bisphenol A (BPA) in plastics
- Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), and other persistent organic pollutants in water, wastewater, and many other places

We often have the skills, abilities, and authority to contribute to community work to take on obesity and address the built environment to support healthy eating and active

living programs. We may struggle, however, to be included in this type of work.

On a different level, environmental public health is called on to respond to natural and human-made disasters—including wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and tornadoes—as well as expected to aid in the recovery of these disasters.

Local governmental environmental health programs face a range of challenges, often due to a combination of fiscal constraints, political pressures, technical barriers, and evolving environmental threats. Addressing these challenges necessitates a combination of innovative strategies, public-private partnerships, working with new and different partners, community engagement, and capacity building efforts.

I have observed a wide range of ways environmental public health has been engaged in community planning and actions around greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. Although at times those words are not used, the work carried out around mitigation is important and under-recognized.

So, given the wide range of work we are asked to engage in, what do environmental health professionals bring to the table? Many of our skills and abilities have been built through the work done in our core environmental health programs that address food, water, waste, vectors, housing, schools, pools, body art, and more. One of the most important skills we have is communication.

We should think of information as a social determinant of health. We should know how to engage with the local information ecosystem and not fear it. Unfortunately, we must

accept that misinformation will travel further, faster, and deeper than truth—in fact, 6 times faster (Vosoughi et al., 2018). It is important to recognize that people's relationships to information are emotional and that legitimate concerns often exist. Actively listening in and of itself often addresses some of the emotions of an issue.

Here are some of the challenges faced in building and supporting strong local (regional or state) environmental public health programs:

- **Limited Funding:** Many governments face budgetary constraints that can limit their ability to adequately fund and staff environmental health programs. Programs funded solely by fees are susceptible to fluctuations in funding as the regulated industry often fluctuates, which creates the need to grow or cut programs based on lags versus needs.
- **Technical Expertise:** Maintaining a staff with the necessary expertise to address a wide range of environmental health issues can be challenging. Hiring staff with a range of skills and knowledge bases is also a challenge. Further, retaining staff, especially with salaries that are not at an adequate level, impacts maintaining a skilled workforce.
- **Political Pressure:** Environmental public health decisions can be controversial. Locally elected or appointed officials might make political decisions that conflict with improving long-term health outcomes.
- **Data Availability:** Comprehensive and timely data are needed to assess environmental health risks. The data can, however, be hard to obtain or interpret at the local level.
- **Changing Environmental Threats:** With climate change and other evolving chal-

lenges, local governments face unpredictable and emerging threats that can be hard to anticipate and address.

- **Public Awareness and Engagement:** There might be a lack of understanding or even skepticism about environmental health risks among the public.
- **Regulatory Challenges:** At times, local regulations might be insufficient or outdated, and it can be hard to navigate overlapping state and federal laws.

Here are a few ways in which we can overcome these challenges:

- **Diversify Funding Streams:** Local governments can look to a mix of fees and federal grants, state support, public–private partnerships, and innovative funding mechanisms to bolster environmental health programs.
- **Capacity Building:** Assure access to continuous training and workshops for federal, state, and local environmental health staff and industry to ensure they are equipped with the latest knowledge and skills. (Check out the educational offerings from NEHA at www.neha.org/education.)
- **Public Engagement and Education:** Engage the community through workshops, public meetings, and educational campaigns to increase awareness, build trust, and garner support for environmental health initiatives. Stories that are supported by data are very important to consider.
- **Collaboration:** Partner with universities, nonprofits, and other agencies to bring in added expertise and resources. Collaborative efforts can also lead to shared solutions and stronger advocacy at higher governmental levels.
- **Data Collection and Technology:** Invest in monitoring equipment, data analysis tools, and technological solutions to ensure accu-

rate, timely, and actionable environmental health data.

- **Clear Regulatory Frameworks:** Streamline and update local regulations to provide clear guidelines for businesses and the community. Collaborate with state and federal entities to ensure cohesive and comprehensive regulatory approaches. Regularly review and update environmental health plans and strategies to account for new information and emerging threats.
- **Advocacy:** Engage in active advocacy at the state and federal levels to secure the necessary support, resources, and legislative changes.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish feedback loops with the community and other partners to regularly review the effectiveness of interventions and recalibrate strategies as needed.
- **Inclusive Decision Making:** Ensure that decisions are made with the involvement of those groups most impacted, especially marginalized communities that might bear a disproportionate environmental health burden. By adopting a proactive and collaborative approach, local governmental environmental health programs can address hyperlocal and global challenges and ensure the well-being of communities in the face of evolving environmental threats. 🌸



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Reference

Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>

Did You Know?

The National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP) is a 400-hr paid internship opportunity that links environmental health undergraduate and graduate students with funded internship placements at qualified environmental public health agencies. Dates for student applications for the summer 2024 session will be announced soon. Applications for environmental health agencies are always open and will be accepted on a rolling basis if positions are open and available. Learn more at www.neha.org/nephip.