

▶ BUILDING CAPACITY



Darryl Booth, MBA

Build Capacity by Adding to Facility Inventory

Editor's Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

This column is authored by technical advisors of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) data and technology section, as well as guest authors. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

Darryl Booth has been monitoring regulatory and data tracking needs of environmental and public health agencies across the U.S. for over 20 years. He is the general manager of environmental health at Accela.

The phrase “facility inventory” just makes sense to me. Facility inventory is the list of known entities that are monitored and served by environmental health, usually through annual permit or license fees and routine surveillance inspections. These entities are your restaurants, pools, tattoo shops, etc., that are often divided into health programs and inspection districts.

If one multiplies the facility inventory of their department by the various annual fees, we have some idea of the budget for that department. And as you know, budgets are a key factor in hiring, facilities, equipment, and training, to name a few.

So, a larger facility inventory usually points to a larger budget.

I will acknowledge that a larger inventory also implies more work (i.e., more inspections, more education, more phone calls, etc.) and more work requires more resources. So, why expand and add to facility inventory if the expansion offsets the increases?

Aside from the obvious public health benefits of more monitoring, organizations benefit from economies of scale. Remember learning about economies of scale from your early college days?

An Easy Economics Review

The phrase “economies of scale” refers to the organizational advantages that come from increasing the scale of operations. As the facility inventory and budget of a health

department grow, fixed costs—such as buildings, computers, software, equipment, and vehicles—are divided among more and more permitted facilities, which results in net incremental increases to the available budget. In addition, a denser inspection district means more time inspecting and less time driving.

Expanding Inventory

While environmental health departments routinely maintain their inventory through new applications and renewals (removing those who do not renew), departments could also purposefully set expansion goals. Through outreach and enforcement, “discovered” facilities can be added.

Complaints

Public complaints might prompt an inspector to visit a facility not previously licensed or permitted. But also, complaints might come from businesses who object to competing businesses that might be “skirting the rules.”

Harvesting Inspector Insights

Routine inspections conducted once or more each year should be a primary dataflow. As inspectors visit each business, they will know promptly if a business has closed or has changed its regulated activities. In both cases, a procedure (e.g., a service request) should direct office staff to make those changes to inventory, which result in rightsizing the inventory based on inspector notes.

Also, never discount what can be learned by an inspector just walking around the district since businesses with similar activities pop-up in the same commercial and

retail areas. This concept holds true for hazardous material programs as smaller auto shops are dense in areas zoned for light industrial use.

Collaborating With Business Licensing Departments

Whether your agency represents a county working with many cities or a health district working with many counties and cities, it is reasonable to request business licensing transactions as a professional courtesy. The licensed businesses, when compared with the environmental health facility inventory, will almost always expose businesses that should also be regulated under environmental health regulations.

Better still, a regular or real-time dataflow between governments and departments can operationalize the processes for opening new businesses.

It is confusing and frustrating for businesses to engage the city, the county, and the state—each with very different processes. It would be great if a business could expect a single point of application to meet all their obligations.

Searching the Internet and Paid Lists

It is simple enough to use your favorite search engine and search, “restaurants near me.” That list might yield some surprises, but it is not very structured.

Another approach is to buy business lists. Many companies publish business lists primarily for marketing purposes. A list of restaurants (with names and addresses) would augment the known restaurant inventory.

Referrals

When the fire department or code enforcement officer leaves a property, they might have learned what regulated activities (or unregulated activities) are going on there. Make that referral easy and environmental health will receive direct information for enforcement or permitting activities.

Community Outreach

Environmental health departments can also work with associations and community organizations to identify unpermitted or unlicensed facilities in the area. This work could

involve conducting surveys or holding public meetings to gather information about local businesses and to make the community aware of regulations and laws.

Planning to Expand

In the same ways that fees rise incrementally, it is reasonable to expect a modest expansion, perhaps 3–5% in most years, within the context of a strategic plan and public health goals.

Ensure that both individual contributors and leadership are made aware of the plan and the expected benefits. Then, execute the plan, prioritizing higher risk health programs and monitoring the program overall. ✨

Corresponding Author: Darryl Booth, General Manager, Environmental Health, Accela, 2633 Camino Ramon #500, San Ramon, CA 94583. E-mail: dbooth@accela.com.



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