

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) represents almost 7,000 governmental, private, academic, and uniformed services sector environmental health professionals in the U.S., its territories, and internationally. NEHA is the profession's strongest advocate for excellence in the practice of environmental health as it delivers on its mission to build, sustain, and empower an effective environmental health workforce.

## **Policy Statement on the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS)**

Adopted: January 2023

Policy Sunset: January 2028

### **Policy Statement**

Environmental health programs carried out by Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarians (REHS/RS), as well as other credentialed personnel, serve to prevent illness, injury, and death. Credentialed personnel within these programs work to improve the health and quality of life of people living in their communities. Their services prevent adverse health outcomes and help communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disease outbreaks and disasters.

NEHA supports the credentialing of the environmental health workforce, in particular people who earn the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential. This credential is recognized in many states and the District of Columbia. Additionally, some jurisdictions have local environmental health credential programs that are required for the practice of environmental health.

A credentialed environmental health workforce is essential to meet the demands required of federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial environmental health agencies. As such, NEHA supports the following:

- Health is the basis of prosperity in every community.
- Safe food, safe drinking water, clean air, safe sewage disposal, emergency response, and healthy living and workplace environments are basic necessities for communities.
- Assuring health equity and a healthy living environment requires a workforce of well-trained and technically competent environmental health specialists and sanitarians who are credentialed.

- Environmental health agencies and industry partners should strive to attract and retain credentialed and trained environmental health professionals to provide capacity and quality in their environmental health programs.

## Analysis

In the U.S., environmental health professionals working at health departments have the responsibility to address environment-related threats and determinants of health. Environmental health professionals form a critical component of the public health delivery system, routinely providing services to prevent adverse health outcomes. They help communities prepare for, respond to, and recover from disease outbreaks and natural or anthropogenic disasters. Environmental health professionals are strategically positioned to identify and intervene to help prevent public and environmental health threats from affecting local communities.

The practice of environmental health is multifaceted. Many environmental health professionals fill the role of the generalist in their job function, with responsibilities in a wide range of programmatic areas. Traditional environmental health programs—including food safety, private drinking water, and onsite wastewater, along with newer priority areas such as environmental sustainability and cannabis regulation—are among the many functions environmental health professionals undertake. Many environmental health professionals have responsibilities in areas such as vector control and emergency preparedness and response, which reflect an increased emphasis on response to natural disasters as well as emerging vectorborne and other communicable diseases. In collaboration with public health colleagues, the environmental health workforce engages in leadership activities, critical thinking, and solving problems encountered by federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial communities.

Uniform educational and credentialing requirements contribute to a knowledgeable profession and support the environmental health workforce. The REHS/RS credential provides a standard of identity for the profession that leads to greater appreciation and recognition for the environmental health profession and ultimately attracts more highly qualified candidates to the workforce (Gerding et al., 2020).

Nationally, workforce characteristics such as educational background, credentials, and job titles within the profession vary greatly. This variability presents challenges for describing the environmental health profession and the professionals who work in health departments. A description of the profession is further complicated at the organizational level by the wide variation of environmental health program characteristics within health departments, as well as differences in environmental health service delivery at the local level that is associated with governance type (e.g., state-governed local health departments versus home rule jurisdictions). A consolidated strategy standardizes criteria specific to the environmental health profession and establishes a professional identity along with the educational and credential requirements necessary for ensuring an effective workforce. The REHS/RS credential provides for this national uniformity.

Data concerning the environmental health workforce strongly point to two key reasons that professional credentialing is important. First, obtaining a professional credential assures that an individual has obtained and can demonstrate core competencies that are relevant to providing communities with high quality environmental health services. Second, the process by which an individual becomes certified also ensures that the individual is current with contemporary standards within the profession and is utilizing best practice models consistent with current research and science.

NEHA asserts that employing credentialed REHS/RS staff in environmental health programs results in an overall economic gain for the community based on disease prevention, the extension of life, enhanced productivity, and reduced lost time from work. There is an added community benefit that comes with better rates of retention within environmental health programs. The environmental health workforce demonstrates a higher level of professionalism that comes with certification through a nationally recognized credential such as the REHS/RS.

Most localities depend on a small cadre of environmental health professionals to protect their communities from disease and environmental hazards. Hiring and retaining REHS/RS credentialed professionals is the most viable way to ensure quality and capacity in environmental health.

## **Justification**

Environmental health professionals have responsibilities in multiple programs. The largest percentages of environmental health professionals work in food safety and protection, body art, public swimming and pool regulation, water and wastewater, emergency preparedness and response, and numerous other related activities (Brooks et al., 2019).

Environmental health professionals represent one of the largest segments of the public health workforce—second only to nursing—and make up approximately 10% of the local and 7% of the state health department workforce (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2017; National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2017). Environmental health professionals play a major role in addressing the root causes of existing and emerging public health threats.

A trained and responsive environmental health workforce demands the rigor of a credentialed workforce, one that maintains the skills and knowledge needed to respond to the dynamic changes that constantly occur within the profession. Credentialing, specifically the REHS/RS credential, ensures the profession remains able to respond to the public health needs and threats from the environment.

## References

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## Drafted by the NEHA Credentialing Committee Members, NEHA Technical Advisors, and NEHA Staff

Larry Ramdin, MPH, MA, REHS/RS, CP-FS, HHS, CHO  
Chair, NEHA Second Vice-President

Rachelle Blackham, MPH, REHS  
NEHA Region 3 Vice-President

Michele DiMaggio, REHS  
NEHA Region 2 Vice-President

Kim Carlton, MPH, REHS/RS  
NEHA Region 4 Vice-President

Mike Fletcher, PhD  
Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs

### NEHA Staff

Eileen Neison

Credentialing Manager

Doug Farquhar, JD

Director of Government Affairs

**Edited by:**

Kristen Ruby-Cisneros

Managing Editor, *Journal of Environmental Health*