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 business of environmental health.

Acutely aware of these challenges, NEHA has initiated a partnership with Accela called Building Capacity. Building Capacity is a joint effort to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession, using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

The Journal is pleased to publish this bimonthly column from Accela that will provide readers with insight into the Building Capacity initiative, as well as be a conduit for fostering the capacity building of environmental health agencies across the country.

The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

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ubstantial or trivial, the spotlight of public attention turns occasionally to public and environmental health issues. During these slivers of time—just flashes of focus—the best of our profession educate, advise, and oftentimes calm policy makers and community members.

The word “Zika” did not exist for most North Americans prior to 2015. As public health officials warned the public to its earliest detection, interest in Zika exploded (Figure 1).

While you and your staff are on the front lines, let me assure you that regular folks, like my parents (and perhaps your parents), learned of the disease, its transmission, and preventative measures from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) interviews and through commercial news outlets reporting on the specific activities of Florida’s state and local health departments.

So, how do environmental health professionals get extra value out of these teachable moments—moments when you are asked the question? What follows is our association’s grassroots wisdom.

Establish a Public Presence

If you aren’t controlling the story, you are the story. Take a moment right now to consider if you know how to quickly get a new message up on your agency’s Web site. Who holds the reins to your agency’s social media accounts? How do you get information to the public via local news? What are its deadlines? Who will send a camera crew for a brief interview?

I will discuss later in more detail how important it is to collaborate with community partners, but I want to emphasize here how particularly beneficial a strong relationship with local media can be.

“Brands pay millions of dollars to advertise on television in order to stay in the public’s consciousness. Local news stations gladly give us this gift for free to feed the public’s hunger for reassurance that Zika won’t kill them or that the local water is safe to drink,” says JoAnn Xiong-Mercado, an environmental health specialist at Marion County Public Health’s Department of Food and Consumer Safety. “We can’t go door-to-door cleaning out gutters to destroy mosquito breeding habitats, but we can empower the public to clean their own gutters.”

Local news outlets allow you to reach a broader audience and build awareness for your department, and when the next event happens, reporters in your area will know who to call—the person with the friendly smile, the professional attire, and the credible quote. Note that this relationship does require some upkeep. Reporters should not only know who to call but also should feel confident that they’ll get a timely response.

Keeping a strong public presence also requires some prep work, such as preparing and practicing responses to various issues and events, including marketing plans for social media, your Web site, news outlets, etc. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel and waste resources developing these items from
scratch. For example, CDC released a communications planning guide for state and local jurisdictions to leverage during a Zika response (www.cdc.gov/zika/pdfs/zika-communications-planning-guide-for-states.pdf). The guide, and there are many others like it, includes communication activities for different scenarios and printable materials that you can share with your community.

**Promote Other Health Programs**

Even if you are not currently the site of a headline-worthy health issue, you will inevitably get some public attention. This spotlight is a good thing. Take advantage of someone calling your office seeking reassurance to pivot the conversation around helpful information and your department’s services.

“National headlines provide a foot in the door of busy people’s attention span,” says Peter Cooley, an environmental health specialist at Coos County Health and Wellness. “Zika virus? Yes, maybe rounding up old tires and disposing of them properly is a worthy goal. And while we’re at it, let’s talk about prenatal vitamins. Foodborne illness citation at your restaurant? Why yes, washing your hands is still a good idea. And while we’re at it, let’s talk about your supply chain.”

While recently visiting the popular Florida Health Zika Web site, I noted a banner that read, “1 out of 3 kids is considered overweight or obese.” See what was done here? These moments are not just a chance to engage directly with the public. Bringing your services to more community members can help you better argue for a program’s existence or expansion, which leads me to the next suggestion.

**Request Resources**

According to the National Association of County and City Health Official’s 2015 Forces of Change survey (www.nacchofilestudy.org/forces-of-change), over 51,700 health department jobs have been lost since the 2008 recession. Though the economy has been improving, along with public agency budgets, 27% of health department directors surveyed indicated that they expected budget cuts to continue. Even if your financial situation is on the upward slope, you are almost guaranteed to be operating with less than what you were used to or needed.

“Environmental health has become a victim of its own success and exists in a world where there is not the political will to properly fund programs unless there is some type of crisis,” says David Troutman, director of environmental health at Cabarrus Health Alliance. “Safe drinking water, food safety, and emerging diseases like Zika have the potential to affect everyone. As these issues hit the headlines, it is important at the local level that we seize these opportunities to promote and improve the delivery of environmental public health services to communities.”

Kimberley Moe, an environmental health practitioner at Fargo Cass Public Health, echoed
this sentiment, “As environmental health agencies, it should be our main goal to not only educate the public but also our legislature.”

No council or board member, mayor, senator, or governor wants to be implicated in the next Flint, Michigan, disaster, or govern over the site of a Zika infection. Despite other competing priorities and departments clamoring for funding, public health is enjoying a unique moment at the front of the conversation. I encourage health departments and community members to leverage this moment, along with their collective political power, to seek and advocate for additional resources to invest back in programs and other strategic capacity-building activities. I acknowledge that industry hasn’t been sitting idly on their hands. As of this writing, it’s well-known that federal Zika funding has been slow to arrive. If the funding problem was easy to solve, it already would have been by now, which delivers us to my final insight.

Establish Community Partnerships

You don’t have to do it alone. Even during calmer times, a successful organization looks beyond its borders to solicit and offer support. In seeking the resources I mentioned above, you can band together with your neighbors to speak directly to legislators as a unified, nonpolitical entity? And amongst yourselves, what collateral, tools, people, and experiences can be shared to operate more efficiently?

I also encourage you to look beyond the typical environmental health network when seeking creative efficiency hacks. Coordinate with local community activists, nonprofits, event organizers, schools, and other departments. One city hosts annual back-to-school health fairs where children come to get their lead levels tested, are brought up-to-date on immunizations, and receive school supplies for the year. Another city partnered with a local animal shelter to run a vaccine day for people and pets.

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t dedicate at least one section of this column to technology and innovation. Do you sense patterns in your data but don’t know how to dig deeper? Are there issues with your processes that you aren’t quite sure how to solve? Consider teaming up with a university or startup on a research project, or embrace open data to leverage the skills of community members and companies to help make new sense of your business. Seattle-King County Health Department worked with Stanford University to study inspection score deviations, resulting in more standardized and reliable inspections (and unintentionally, happier inspectors). You can read more about that study at https://goo.gl/XvcWQh. Chicago, that bastion of innovation, is testing an analytical model to enhance its beach water quality inspection process to provide timely health advisories using a model built by a team of volunteer “citizen data scientists.” You can read more about endeavor at https://goo.gl/l1Z2LD.

Join the Conversation

How are you or your organization creating opportunities from headlines? Share your stories or opinions, download free marketing/communication and media list templates (Figure 2), and access links to additional resources at the Building Capacity LinkedIn page at www.linkedin.com/groups/6945320. 

Acknowledgement: Nearly every recommendation that surfaced in this article is credited to NEHA members through foundational NEHA Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition presentations, award submissions, and scholarship applications—an ongoing testament to the acumen of the professionals among us. Thank you.

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