Texarkana is a large state and Austin is a cool town by almost any standard. Enjoy a bite at Stiles Switch BBQ. Catch the famously elusive Radiohead, who recently headlined at the Austin City Limits Music Festival. Attend the Texas Environmental Health Association’s educational conference that took place in October. It was not, however, “Karma Police” that blew my mind. It was the speaker from the state health department who inadvertently rocked my world.

The words flowed from the representative’s mouth as if he was unaware of their profound importance. Roughly 90 of Texas’s local health departments are almost, or entirely, comprised of environmental health professionals. While I don’t have the exact data to support my contention, I believe a large segment of the national government public health workforce is similar. You might retort, “So what?” Let’s unpack this starburst.

First, the consensus among my peers is that nurses make up the single largest segment of the professional public health workforce. To the best of my knowledge, there is scant evidence to support this hypothesis. Available information from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation suggests there are roughly 40,000 public health nurses. Contrast that with the number of environmental health scientists employed in the U.S. In 2010, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated there are 17,540 environmental health workers in federal government, 37,970 in state government, and 32,930 in local government. These numbers bring the sum to around 88,000. Even accounting for rounding errors and confounders, there appears to be roughly two environmental health professionals for every public health nurse.

Empirically, we are the largest profession in the public health universe (excluding administrators and clerical support). We are also a community axis and access resource. Check out the below list of sectors that were on a Federal Emergency Management Agency planning phone call during the recent Baton Rouge flooding response:

• communications
• energy
• academic institutions
• finance/insurance
• grocers and convenience stores
• hospital/medical/pharmacy
• lodging and restaurants
• logistics/transportation
• manufacturing
• retail
• tourism
• umbrella organizations

What is the one profession that has the greatest insight into most, if not all, of these sectors? Environmental health.

Shortly before I started work at NEHA, I was the director of programs at the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). The executive director at the time was a friend with the leadership of the U.S. Army Public Health Command. Their leadership and key subject matters experts came en masse to NACCHO’s offices to explore potential areas of collaboration because many military bases are adjacent to civilian communities and a substantial percentage of military dependents live in those communities. As the Department of Defense team introduced themselves, it was evident that the largest fraction of the contingent were sanitarians or industrial hygienists. I was stunned. While chronic disease and wellness issues were given significant attention, and deservedly so, the lion’s share of the dialogue centered on infectious and vectorborne disease, clean food and water, and chemical/biological exposures. The military is, in large measure, a reflection of society at large, and environmental health figures as a prominent player in protecting and promoting public health.

Fast forward to the current conversation saturating the ether—Public Health 3.0. The current Acting Assistant Secretary for Health Dr. Karen DeSalvo spearheads this effort. Dr. DeSalvo is an effective and compelling leader, one I greatly admire. Public Health 3.0 is intended to be a major upgrade in public health practice that emphasizes cross-sectorial environmental, policy, and systems-level actions. A kindred spirit to Health in All Policies, Public Health 3.0 represents a challenge to business and community leaders, state law-
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makers, and federal policymakers to incorporate health into all areas of governance.

Now then, check out the areas Dr. DeSalvo would like the country to focus its national health system integration efforts on:

- economic development,
- education,
- transportation,
- food,
- environment,
- housing, and
- safe neighborhoods.

Much of the priority attention noted above is directly threaded to our spheres of influence. Of course they are. I wonder out loud, “Public health seems to be a part of environmental health, and not the other way around.”

While size does not make a profession, effective and consistent performance, coupled with character-based trust, does. I don’t take one iota of solace in our numerical superiority. In fact, I’m alarmed that we have not socialized this dominance and achieved greater professional cohesion and impact as a by-product.

The National Academy of Medicine recently released a report that describes the environmental health profession as foundational to the nation’s health. In that spirit, I suggested to the interviewer that the real question was not about specific services, but rather whether the services of a registered environmental health specialist were present in any given community. The basket of individual services will necessarily change with the times, while the presence of a qualified environmental health workforce will ensure that the vision of Public Health 3.0 is attained.

Irrespective of the challenges at hand, we are an essential player in the health of the nation. It is true in Texas. It is true during emergencies. It is true in the uniformed services. It is true in the civilian world.

Please know that your association is going to connect the dots and tirelessly advocate for you as the general consensus is that you are a strategic national asset. Thank you, Texas, for bringing the vision into laser sharp focus.

A taste of Texas. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

An association funded by The Kresge Foundation to inquire about childhood environmental health services interviewed me this morning. The key question centered on what services environmental health programs should be providing to ensure the health of children ages 0–8 years. I challenged the interviewer and suggested he was asking the wrong question. The National Academy of Medicine recently released a report that describes the environmental health profession as foundational to the nation’s health. In that spirit, I suggested to the interviewer that the real question was not about specific services, but rather whether the services of a registered environmental health specialist were present in any given community. The basket of individual services will necessarily change with the times, while the presence of a qualified environmental health workforce will ensure that the vision of Public Health 3.0 is attained.

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2017 Walter F. Snyder Award
Call for Nominations
Nomination deadline is April 28, 2017.

Given in honor of NSF International’s co-founder and first executive director, the Walter F. Snyder Award recognizes outstanding leadership in public health and environmental health protection. The annual award is presented jointly by NSF International and the National Environmental Health Association.

Nominations for the 2017 Walter F. Snyder Award are being accepted for environmental health professionals achieving peer recognition for:

- outstanding accomplishments in environmental and public health protection,
- notable contributions to protection of environment and quality of life,
- demonstrated capacity to work with all interests in solving environmental health challenges,
- participation in development and use of voluntary consensus standards for public health and safety, and
- leadership in securing action on behalf of environmental and public health goals.

Past recipients of the Walter F. Snyder Award include:

2016 – Steve Tackitt
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1978 – Larry J. Gordon
1977 – Charles C. Johnson, Jr.
1975 – Charles L. Senn
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1973 – William A. Broadway
1972 – Ralph C. Pickard
1971 – Callis A. Atkins

The 2017 Walter F. Snyder Award will be presented during NEHA’s 81st Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition to be held in Grand Rapids, MI July 10-13, 2017.

For more information or to download nomination forms, please visit www.nsf.org or www.neha.org or contact Stan Hazan at NSF at 734-769-5105 or hazan@nsf.org.