I want to start by saying Happy New Year to all my National Environmental Health Association family and friends. I hope all of you had festive good times with your loved ones. I know that I did. After all the holiday parties, dinners, drinks, and gatherings, the only social distancing occurring around me are the buttons on my shirt. I believe we all hope for a better year in 2022.

This month I am going a little off topic to talk about something we are all experiencing in our communities. The lack of a workforce and supply chain issues are not just environmental health or public health problems—the concerns are all around us. Some of our food service industry friends might be the hardest hit, but it is undoubtedly not limited to just them.

The last labor information I heard is that there are over 10 million advertised jobs in the country and only 8.5 million unemployed individuals. To me, 8.5 million seems like many people to fill jobs, but in reality, they are being very particular about what they are looking for in a position. Since workers are in high demand, they can be more selective on where they want to work and the type of that work.

According to Forbes Magazine, there are many different reasons people choose not to go back to work or be selective about what they want to do. The most noted reason for employees not to take a job is that the pay is too low. Wage growth is climbing at its fastest pace since the late 1970s and early 1980s, primarily because employers are trying to draw workers back in from the sidelines. The pandemic could also be keeping those who are worried about becoming sick from returning to work. Whatever the reason, job seekers appear to have leverage to determine when they will return and what they will do when they return. Many employees are insisting on higher pay and better benefits, while others want to work remotely. The Great Reassessment, as some call it, is changing the world in which we live.

I know you are saying to yourself, "Yeah, we hear you, but how is this related to environmental health?" I can’t think of a single day that the economy has not affected my environmental health program in the last several weeks. Let me start by saying that the world has not been kind to many of us in public health over the past 22 months. Everyone is already stressed, yet when we reach a turning point in the pandemic, we all know we will be asked to catch up on everything that fell behind.

Environmental health professionals are trying to get back into the field to inspect restaurants, swimming pools, and massage and body art facilities, yet we hear it all the time—why are you here? Many establishments are uncomfortable with nonemployees entering their facilities, some for real and some as an excuse. At other times, inspectors are returning to the office, saying the facility was not open. They have to determine if the facility has shuttered the doors for good or closed because they have no staff to work. I have even heard rumors where an establishment demanded proof of vaccine before allowing an inspector on site.

I decided to talk about the economy this month because it is affecting my ability to hire new staff. Like the rest of the economy, I lost two staff that were able to find better paying positions. I always encourage people to improve their situation and I am happy for both, but I never dreamed that I would see so few people apply to replace them. In the past I would get dozens of qualified (at least on paper) candidates. Now I hear crickets from job seekers. I understand that public health has never offered the best paid positions. We do, however, have great careers and many of us love the work we do. I also believe that our work–life balance is second to none.

So why is it so difficult to find great new help? The pay in our office has climbed 10% this year alone, yet it does not seem to matter. Are there not enough people in the workforce with a science background? Are people not willing to enter environmental public health because of the political strife surrounding COVID-19? Is it because people do not want to go out in the public to work as we cannot inspect restaurants, swimming pools, day cares, and schools from home? At least, not yet. I need people who are willing to come to an office at least some of the time and spend time out in public.

I also mentioned supply chain issues at the beginning of my column. The lack of goods is changing our world as much as the lack of employees. I am sure all of you have witnessed bare shelves in the local grocery or discount stores. The same thing is occur-
Did You Know?

The NEHA Denver office has moved! While still located in the same building, we have moved from the 10th floor to the 1st floor. Our new address is 720 South Colorado Boulevard, Suite 105A, Denver, CO, 80246. More information about our new office will be shared in the NEHA News section of the March issue.

The NEHA Endowment Foundation was established to enable NEHA to do more for the environmental health profession than its annual budget might allow. Special projects and programs supported by the foundation will be carried out for the sole purpose of advancing the profession and its practitioners.

Individuals who have contributed to the foundation are listed below by club category. These listings are based on what people have actually donated to the foundation—not what they have pledged. Names will be published under the appropriate category for 1 year; additional contributions will move individuals to a different category in the following year(s).

For each of the categories, there are a number of ways NEHA recognizes and thanks contributors to the foundation. If you are interested in contributing to the Endowment Foundation, please call NEHA at (303) 756-9090. You can also donate online at www.neha.org/donate.

Thank you.

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