I am days from my 28th anniversary working in environmental public health. Throughout my career I have heard that environmental health is unknown, underappreciated, and underfunded. I will not argue with any of these perceptions because I am right there with you in these discussions. Most professionals in this field understand that environmental health is where public health began nearly 200 years ago.

It has been shown repeatedly that core environmental health programs like air quality, water quality, food safety, and sanitation have nearly doubled life expectancy. Yet, most individuals in the U.S. do not know what environmental health is or the role it plays everyone’s lives.

When talking to others about environmental health, I like to explain that it is working to ensure that the water we drink is safe, the food we eat is safe, and the air we breathe will not make us sick. Environmental health also provides protection against communicable diseases, vector issues, natural and manmade disasters, and mass gatherings. Though these programs have always been the core of environmental health, we are doing so much more.

So why is it when I say I work in environmental health, people think I clean the schools and hospitals or hug trees for a living? Where did we lose control of the messaging? How can people not know what we do or who we are? Do we have to have connections in Hollywood to make movies about environmental health or have an environmental health specialist save the planet? Actually, some of that has been done, but the hero was not called an environmental health professional.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has started several marketing initiatives to market both the association and the profession. Over the past several years, NEHA has been working to improve the exposure of environmental health to our policy makers. Most of us believe that a person who is appreciated will always do more than expected. Many of us want to feel appreciated for what we do.

NEHA Hill Day is one example of what the association is doing to gain recognition for the profession. The NEHA Board of Directors uses the Hill Day opportunity to discuss how environmental health protects the public and the importance of federal funding for state, local, tribal, and territorial programs, as well as support for our federal partners. NEHA has also hired staff in Washington, DC, to have staff available to attend meetings with members of Congress, congressional staff, and agency leaders at a moment’s notice.

In June, NEHA penned a letter to the White House encouraging the inclusion of environmental health in the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Last month the White House announced that it would be redistributing $7.4 billion from the American Rescue Plan to hire and train public health workers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Also in June, NEHA hired a marketing firm to work on a rebranding effort for the association. The rebranding will involve more than a new look; the change will include improvements to the website, including how members access their accounts to reduce frustrations in accessing continuing education information, online training, and more.

NEHA has also created an animated video to expose the overlooked and undervalued work of environmental health professionals. The video shows some of the many ways an “invisible” environmental health professional impacts and protects many aspects of our daily lives. I encourage everyone to take a look at the video and then share it. NEHA is sharing the video in as many places as possible, but without members doing their part, it will sit on the website and not reach a larger audience. You can find the video at www.neha.org/eh-animated-video.

An additional item that has been discussed is the creation of a toolkit to help state and
local environmental health programs get on the curriculum at junior high and high schools. A toolkit could help make students more aware of environmental health and be used as a recruitment tool to get students interested in pursuing a career in environmental health.

With everything NEHA has done or is doing, I still understand that environmental health professionals want to hear their elected officials reach out and say thank you. Unfortunately, this type of recognition and appreciation will not come from actions at NEHA. Individuals who are proud of their profession, along with departments and state affiliates, must carry a large part of this responsibility. An idea could be as simple as a state affiliate hosting a legislative breakfast, not to lobby but to educate attendees on the benefits of a strong environmental health program. Professionals could also work with their governors to proclaim an environmental health day or week in conjunction with World Environmental Health Day, which is observed on September 26.

As a gardener, one of my favorite quotes is: “The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago. The second best time is now.” We are at that crossroads now. We should have marketed our profession 20 years ago, but since we didn’t, we need to do it now!}

President@neha.org

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