Membership With Benefits: Opportunities for Professional Growth

As a board member and active member of NEHA, I am often asked about membership benefits. NEHA has an assortment of benefits such as opportunities for continuing education and professional growth, helping us to remain current regarding emerging science, best practices, and trends in the environmental health field. NEHA provides a forum that connects its members, whether it is the Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, engagement in a technical work group, or online education and training. Most of the online courses and training sessions are offered to members without tuition or fees.

During the past few years, our communities have been hit hard with natural disasters and a number of large multistate foodborne disease outbreaks. NEHA has taken a proactive role by providing the training needed to prepare our workforce for emergency response, which could mean response and recovery to a natural disaster or a coordinated response to a foodborne disease outbreak. In this column, I will provide a few examples of how NEHA has had an integral role in building capacity in the area of emergency response for environmental health professionals, providing opportunities for professional growth. If you have not had the opportunity to attend the courses noted below, I encourage you to contact NEHA or look at the convenient online options.

Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response
After Hurricane Katrina and the devastating hurricane season in 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) developed the Environmental Health Training in Emergency Response (EHTER) course. This multiday awareness-level course was designed to increase the level of emergency preparedness among environmental health professionals and other response personnel by providing them with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to address the environmental health impacts of emergencies and disasters. It includes 10 modules covering challenges encountered during emergency preparedness and response for various environmental health disciplines such as food safety, drinking water, vectors and pest control, worker safety, and disaster management.

Since 2007, NEHA has provided assistance to CDC in the development and delivery of EHTER and has offered a condensed version at our AEC. The course is available year-round through the Federal Emergency Management Agency at their Anniston, Alabama, location. This version of the course is available free of charge to state and local environmental health professionals. Through this arrangement, thousands of environmental health professionals have either participated in the full five-day EHTER course, the condensed courses, or the online version. In 2012, over 1,100 environmental health professionals completed the online EHTER course and in the first six months of 2013, nearly 700 individuals had completed the online course—that is nearly 2,000 members of our workforce in an 18-month period. And, more than 2,000 individual modules have been viewed for this course outside of full course completions. This is a tremendous service for members who are challenged with travel restrictions.

To view or take the free online course, go to www.nehacert.org. For additional information, contact Christl Tate at ctate@neha.org.

Training Opportunities for Foodborne Outbreak Response
CDC estimates that each year in the U.S., 1,000 foodborne disease outbreaks are reported along with 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths related to foodborne disease. This includes approximately 150 national or multistate investigations that require a tremendous amount of coordination and collaboration among environmental and public health agencies and food safety experts. Environmental health professionals from all sectors must continue to be highly trained and ready to respond to foodborne disease outbreak investigations.

NEHA has developed foodborne illness workshops that travel the country. NEHA has also taken official positions that can be shared with your agencies or local associations and is involved in food safety initiatives. These combined efforts help our members grow professionally and prepare to respond to environmental health emergencies.
Epi-Ready

Epi-Ready is a two-day workshop developed specifically for environmental and public health professionals responsible for investigating foodborne disease outbreaks. This course was developed in partnership with CDC and was designed with a team-approach concept for training. The inaugural course was offered in Atlanta, Georgia, in 2003, and over the last 10 years, 64 courses have been offered throughout the country, training nearly 3,000 environmental and public health professionals. Each of our 50 states has been represented along with Jamaica, Guam, and several countries around the globe.

Teams of participants from response agencies are encouraged to attend as a team and include their environmental health specialist, epidemiologist, laboratory staff, public health nurse, public information officer, or any team member who would have a critical role in responding to a foodborne outbreak. This approach helps the participating agency teams strengthen collaboration and work through details of a response as scenarios and case studies are used throughout the training. What I found to be most impressive about this course is that NEHA has a cadre of highly qualified and experienced instructors who travel around the country to teach this course.

NEHAs participation in the Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response (CIFOR, www.cifor.us), which is a national working group formed to increase collaboration and reduce the burden of foodborne illness in the U.S., has been vital to ensuring that the information from CIFOR’s guidelines is followed in the curriculum.

In 2008, NEHA was recognized and awarded the 2008 Food Safety Leadership Award by NSF International for Epi-Ready. The success and longevity of this course is due to the perseverance and collaborative work by the NEHA staff and our partners from CDC, CIFOR, and local, state, and federal agencies. Looking ahead, NEHA staff will be working with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on a three-day Epi-Ready for Response Teams Training. It will initially be delivered to 10 states that were recently awarded with a cooperative agreement to form Rapid Response Teams to improve response for food and feed emergencies.

For additional information about Epi-Ready, visit our Web site at www.neha.org/epi_ready/index.html or contact Ginny Coyle at gcoyle@neha.org.

Industry-Foodborne Illness Investigation Training and Recall Response Workshop (I-FIIT-RR)

Demand continues for foodborne disease outbreak training inclusive of the food industry. This 1.5 day I-FIIT-RR workshop was developed in 2011 to assist regulatory officials and retail food industry representatives to collaborate and prepare for a rapid and effective recall response or outbreak investigation. Like Epi-Ready, it follows the CIFOR guidelines and the recently released CIFOR industry guidelines.

This workshop was recently enhanced to include food recall and traceback components, incorporating both food safety and food defense perspectives. I-FIIT-RR is a result of collaboration and input by a team of industry representatives, local/state/federal officials, and many others. The principle behind this training approach is that agencies and communities can use existing resources and relationships to improve overall effectiveness and efficiency for retail food protection response activities. Another benefit can be the improved risk communication to the public, whether the need is to inform the local community about an outbreak or a product recall and the potential risks.

NEHA members have received the benefit of this training course in Memphis, Tennessee; Columbus, Ohio; and Washington, DC. In 2012, NEHA received cooperative agreement funding for the enhanced I-FIIT-RR workshop from FDA. It launched at this year's AEC in Washington, DC, and I recently received word that three courses will be offered around the country within the next year, with three more to follow.

To learn more about attending this workshop or bringing this workshop to your area, visit our Web site at www.neha.org/ifiit/index.html or contact Elizabeth Landeen at elandeen@neha.org.

Registry of Food Safety Credentials

In 2011, NEHA was awarded cooperative agreement funding from FDA to develop an online repository of food safety credential holders and experts. This registry is being designed to help meet requirements set forth in the Food Safety Modernization Act to implement an integrated food safety system and build the global capacity of food safety professionals. Another function of this database will be for use during foodborne illness outbreaks and in food defense situations.

The final product will be an online database of food safety experts noting their verifiable food safety credentials. The pilot project has begun for the North American region with the intention of expanding to a database that holds data for food safety experts around the world. The foundation for this sizable database will be NEHAs current database of food safety credential holders. Some of the key goals for this tool include 1) being user-friendly for credential holders and for entities searching for nearby experts, 2) being easily maintained and updated by a credential holder, 3) having easily verifiable information, 4) being a secure site, and 5) establishing an understanding of equivalencies for credentials and skills across borders.

Development of this registry is a five-year project and is being led by Rance Baker of NEHA. Rance is working with a team of NEHA staff and a stakeholder group comprised of public and private sector representatives. The testing phase is underway now and both the North American and international launches are scheduled for 2014! Thanks to Rance and his team and our partners at the Division of Human Resources Development in the Office of Regulatory Affairs at FDA for their work on this innovative project, which will serve as a resource for food safety experts and the food industry throughout the world.

For additional information about the registry, contact Rance Baker at rbaker@neha.org.

In Closing

Remember that each of the courses mentioned above is usually offered at no cost to NEHA members. These opportunities have been developed and funded through cooperative agreements with our federal partners. NEHA members can also enjoy the benefit of receiving continuing education credits for each of the courses offered by NEHA, whether they are offered in person or online!

These are just a few examples of training opportunities and progressive activities that are being provided as member benefits. For continued on page 49
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additional information about in-person training opportunities and hundreds of online courses, visit our Web site at www.neha.org. I am proud to share information about our organization and the benefits provided—NEHA is proactive and makes the professional growth of its members a priority. The combined efforts of the NEHA staff, volunteers, stakeholders, and partners have contributed to a workforce that is prepared to respond.

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the print version of the Journal. To update your e-mail address, simply visit neha.org and access your profile through My NEHA. And always, if you need additional assistance with updating your e-mail address, please don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and give us a call.

In years to come, I anticipate that our historian (presently Dick Pantages, who serves us so well) will zero in on this article, as this day truly takes the association and our efforts to be of service to you to a whole new level. Enjoy!

Did You Know?  

NEHA was asked by the Council to Improve Foodborne Outbreak Response (CIFOR) to conduct an assessment of the capacity of local and state agencies to undertake foodborne illness outbreak investigation and response. The summary and detailed results are published in a full report, Assessment of Foodborne Illness Outbreak Response and Investigation Capacity in U.S. Environmental Health Food Safety Regulatory Programs, at www.neha.org/pdf/CIFOR_FBIOutbreakCapacityAssessment_ResultsReport_Final.pdf.