

► DIRECT FROM AAS



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Call to Arms: Don't Just Join, Get Involved!



Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

Eric Bradley is an AAS board member and currently works as an environmental health manager. He has been a Registered Environmental Health Specialist for 15 years and has over 20 years of experience in the environmental health field.

Many young professionals entering the environmental health field want to build up their résumés quickly so it will stand out compared to others entering the field. One of the quickest ways to build up your résumé is by joining professional associations.

When I started my first environmental health job in 1997, I wanted to build up my résumé and so I became a member of the National Environmental Health Association

(NEHA). As I was not even making twice the minimum wage (\$5/hr at that time), I let the membership drop after only 1 year.

For the first 9 years of my career, I worked at three different health departments in two different states and was not a member of any of the state affiliates of NEHA. The state affiliates were briefly mentioned during onboarding but it was not encouraged or even suggested that I should join these organizations.

It wasn't until I started working for my current employer (in a third state) that I was encouraged to join a state affiliate. While filling out all of the human resources forms on my first day, my new supervisor, Larry Linnenbrink, handed me the membership application for the Iowa Environmental Health Association (IEHA). He said to fill it out and give it back to him. At that time, membership to IEHA was only \$20 and the other seven environmental health specialists I would be working with were IEHA members. Their membership was not because each had asked to be a member, it was due to the fact that Linnenbrink felt it was important for them to be members. If one of us wanted to take an active role on an IEHA committee, he was supportive and actually encouraged this activity. I look back now on May 8, 2006, and can say this date marks when environmental health became my career and not just my job.

I immediately volunteered to represent IEHA on a state legislative policy committee. This work led to becoming president of IEHA a few years later, as well as being active with almost all of its committees over the years. It also led me to being an active member of the Iowa Public Health Association, a member of advisory workgroups at the National Association of County and City Health Officials, and taking an active role in NEHA (conference speaker, technical advisor, committee/sub-committee member, and instructor).

Taking an active role with your state association and/or a national association can open more doors for you than just listing these memberships on your résumé. These endeavors will allow you to not only share

your knowledge and expertise but also give you the opportunity to learn more about the field, demonstrate your knowledge, and allow you to network and collaborate. It also provides leadership opportunities where you can find a mentor and/or find someone else to mentor.

The American Academy of Sanitarians believes that these are essential qualities to have as an environmental health professional. The Academy is “dedicated to improving the practice, elevating the standards, and advancing the profession of environmental health. The Academy meets these goals through professional and scholarly activities, mentoring of future environmental health leaders, providing scholarships to promising students in accredited environmental health programs, and continuing to promote leaders in the diverse areas of this worthy profession” (American Academy of Sanitarians [AAS], 2014). If you speak with an Academy Diplomate, there is a high probability that they had someone at some point in their career who pushed them or provided them the encouragement to do and be more.

As a Diplomate, the Academy recognizes you as a professional with exceptional knowledge and experience in the field of environmental health. The Diplomate status is the second “highest certification available in the field of environmental health” (AAS, 2014). To become a Diplomate, you have had to go beyond the job requirements of an environmental health professional by taking the initiative to obtain a master’s degree and the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential, as well as have a paper published in a peer-reviewed journal (AAS, 2009). The highest environmental health certification available is Diplomate Laureate, which recognizes someone who has 25 years of experience in environmental health, as well as 15

years as an REHS/RS and five of the following: hold an advanced degree beyond a master’s degree; hold more than one nationally recognized credential; have at least five published papers; have held an elected office in a state or national environmental health association; membership on a national or international advisory board or standard committee; hold a patent or copyright; have received a state or national environmental health award, or membership on a professional examination, licensing, or other environmental health credentialing board (AAS, 2008).

NEHA Immediate Past-President Dr. Priscilla Oliver discussed the importance and necessity of volunteering and networking in two of her columns in the *Journal of Environmental Health*. Dr. Oliver points out in one column that volunteering can lead to a career or change an existing career, be fulfilling, improve the profession, and ensure our individual successes (Oliver, 2020a). In another column, she highlights that networking is the “sharing of skills, knowledge, abilities, talents, culture, the dos and don’ts, and enjoying the relationship of being connected” (Oliver, 2020b).

By getting involved with environmental health associations, your career can take off and take you places you never envisioned. These opportunities might be speaking engagements, becoming an expert on something you never thought you would have to learn, or even awards for your work. At the end of the day, however, knowing you have had an impact and made a difference in the lives of others is always the most rewarding factor.

There is nothing wrong with joining an organization just to be a member. Most of us do not have the time or energy to be an active member of every association we join. Being a member keeps you connected and allows you to stay current with the association’s activi-

ties. Members receive general information and training opportunities related to their fields of work. Members can also discover possible opportunities for collaboration within the associations they are active in.

By taking that extra step and becoming involved with one, two, or even three associations where you believe your skills, knowledge, and experience can have an impact, you will be able to participate in the development of local, state, and national environmental health policies that can have a positive impact on the communities we serve. At the end of the day, is this goal not our highest priority? 🐼

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