

► **DirectTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Our association is actively supporting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) effort to rebuild the environmental health workforce in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Aligned with that effort, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has received an award from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to lead efforts in the Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education initiative, with a primary emphasis in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. We have contracted the Region II Head Start Association (www.region2headstart.org) to assist us in advancing that effort. Our aim is to ensure that every child reaches their full potential by being provided healthy, safe, and secure conditions during their youth. We are privileged and thankful to be involved in this effort. Our new partnership with Head Start represents a departure from our more traditional work and illustrates the value of our association in building bridges across disciplines in support of the most vulnerable among us—children.

I invited Andy Roszak, the principal contractor to Region II Head Start, to share his thoughts on the project. I trust you will enjoy hearing directly from him.

ddyjack@neha.org
Twitter: @DTDyjack

Every Child Deserves a Head Start

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Building Resilience in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

Andrew Roszak, MPA,
JD, EMT-Paramedic
Institute for Childhood Preparedness
www.childhoodpreparedness.org

In November 2018, Dr. Dyjack shared that NEHA had been entrusted with a multimillion dollar federal award to rebuild environmental health in Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. This work is well underway and I am writing to you from the Caribbean to share a brief update regarding a portion of that work. Through this grant, NEHA is supporting the U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Health and the Puerto Rico Department of Health, while also developing tools and resources that will have national-level applicability.

Through support from CDC and ATSDR, we have begun providing technical assistance and have also hired full-time staff who are actively working on the islands and aiding in the recovery process.

As you may expect, the impact of the 2017 hurricane season, which caused an estimated \$282.27 billion in damages, has been and will continue to be long lasting. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, many buildings were damaged, destroyed or later condemned, including the hospitals that serve St. Thomas and St. Croix, as well as several of the Department of Health's buildings, clinics, and offices. More than a year after the hurricane passed, the Department of Health continues to work out of temporary space as their main office building undergoes repair and rehabilitation.

NEHA's work has been instrumental in supplying subject matter expertise and capacity to the impacted jurisdictions. Further, three of the NEHA projects focus on protecting children from harmful postdisaster exposures to chemicals, contaminants, and other hazards. Building off ATSDR's existing initiative, Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education, NEHA has engaged in a collaborative effort with the Region II Head Start Association and my organization, the Institute for Childhood Preparedness. Together, we are working with environmental health, early childhood, and child care licensing professionals to develop tools and resources to help identify those facilities that might require additional atten-

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tion, assistance, and resources in the postdisaster response and recovery environment.

I founded the Institute for Childhood Preparedness to empower early childhood professionals with resiliency and preparation. With my background as a firefighter-paramedic (who has delivered three babies), turned attorney, turned public health professional with expertise in environmental health and emergency preparedness, I have a strong passion for supporting those who cannot advocate for themselves. In recent years, I have dedicated my career towards preparing workforces to help young children grow into healthy lives. The institute offers workshops and trainings created specifically for the early child care workforce with key lessons learned from public health emergencies, natural disasters, and mass shootings, with a focus on improved safety and disaster prevention. Given my background and expertise, and NEHA's mission and connection to its members, it made perfect sense that we would team up together on this important work.

The work of protecting the youngest generation is important as they cannot advocate for themselves. Our efforts are unique in that



The National Environmental Health Association and Region II Head Start convened a focus group in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with child care professionals from the private and public sectors. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

we are looking out for infants through age 5, a time when the brain develops the most in an individual's life and when they are most impressionable.

Our work takes place against a backdrop of many challenges—from working in areas that are still in the midst of recovering from one of the worst hurricane seasons on record to the restarting of one of the world's largest oil refineries in St. Croix. Throughout it all, one theme prevails: the protection of children's health is of the utmost importance.

We are working each day with those who are caring for children to better equip them

to protect children from environmental and public health contaminants, chemicals, exposures, and threats. The national scope and application of the tools and resources we are creating is enormous. Consider that more than 60% of children attend child care before entering kindergarten and there are approximately 5 million child care workers in the U.S. These hard-working professionals will benefit directly from our projects and the lessons we are learning in the posthurricane Caribbean. Most notably, by benefiting child care workers, we can strive toward improving the care and health of children nationwide.

As a professional, I can think of no higher calling than to help protect those who are unable to protect themselves. This project does just that and it helps to ensure our children have safe and healthy environments in which to play, learn, and grow.

I appreciate the continued dedication, commitment, and professionalism of NEHA's members and staff who help support this project. I am grateful for our partnership with NEHA, which allows us to work on these important issues. As our work continues in the Caribbean, we will be sharing more of our findings and lessons learned. We encourage NEHA members to reach out if they would like to become more intimately involved. 🚗



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