NEHA recently received an e-mail that related the writer's concerns for an initiative by the City of Chicago to establish a self-certification program for certain retail food facilities. A new Chicago city ordinance allows for designated low-risk facilities to self-certify compliance. These facilities include retailers that sell prepackaged foods and recently inspected restaurants with no history of foodborne illness or closure. The stated purpose of the initiative is to enable the city's finite resources to be allocated to higher-risk operations.

This issue was widely discussed by the NEHA board of directors and food safety technical advisors, generating a general consensus that the Chicago initiative appeared to be an acceptable if not optimal practice. There was agreement that the new Chicago model appeared to be similar to actions being taken today by many jurisdictions that are seeking to stretch available resources. The adoption of risk-based inspection categories and frequencies is now a common practice, consistent with our responsibility to work better/smarter/cheaper whenever doing so is not at the expense of the public’s health.

Efficiency/Efficacy
The Chicago initiative makes a case for the importance of clearly understanding and communicating the relationship between program efficiencies and program impacts or efficacy. This is especially important when developing or implementing service-level changes. When implemented strategically, program efficiencies do not always have to result in decreased public health protection. Strong environmental health programs need to be able to demonstrate accountability, efficient use of resources, innovative revenue generation, and evidence of impact.

Resource Needs—How Much Is Enough?
The challenge appears to be the difficulty in defining adequate resources. There are a number of initiatives that have sought to characterize the competence or quality of environmental health programs, some more successfully than others. Many environmental health programs are now focusing on measurement of performance outcomes, rather than simply counting activities. There is also a recently initiated national certification process for public health agencies including environmental health programs. Additionally, federal, state, and local agencies have developed model codes or guidance documents that are now widely available. Although some of these measurement tools are still in development and there are significant variations in community needs, program evaluation is important and useful.

Financial Resources—Innovative Funding
While many environmental health programs may be able to determine their adequate or appropriate resource needs, their currently available funding may not be able to meet those needs. Environmental health is fortunately in a somewhat unique position relative to other
public health and safety programs in that there are multiple alternative sources of revenue beyond taxes, including fees and contracts.

I was recently in contact with a local agency that was facing drastic tax revenue losses. They had been initially informed by their governing body that fee revenue increases were not an available option. As the public became aware of the consequences and likelihood of significant reductions in services and protection, the elected officials in that jurisdiction became open to revenue-generating fee options and they developed the political will to adopt a new fee schedule that covered most if not all of the revenue shortfall. Many environmental health programs in California and other states have decreased or entirely eliminated taxation as a revenue source, and NEHA has been active in sharing these best practices in alternative revenue enhancement.

Environmental health must also be in a position to favorably compete for general fund or tax revenues where appropriate. NEHA has established an innovative venture, the Center for Priority Based Budgeting, that is now working in many cities and counties to assist in developing budget allocations that reflect actual community needs and priorities. This activity will hopefully elevate awareness as to the value and importance of environmental health services.

The Value of Compelling Evidence
With heightened competition for finite resources, it has become increasingly important that environmental health programs are able to convince the public, elected officials, and ratepayers that program dollars are being well spent. NEHA has advocated the concept of ROI (return on investment) as a means to demonstrate maximizing “bang for the buck.” The term “evidence-based practices” is now being widely used to describe activities or programs that have a documented basis for their efficacy. There is a limited but expanding body of experience and independent literature that serves as evidence for establishing optimum inspection frequencies, appropriate staffing levels, and the cost/benefit relationship of our programs. NEHA representatives have been active participants in assisting agencies, academia, and industry in collaborations to provide the basis for sound data-driven decision making.

Lessons Learned
We continue to experience widespread reductions in public and environmental health services, and these resource shortfalls are well documented. Some, but not all, are related to the continuing poor economy. We can all learn from the experiences of programs that have enjoyed some degree of success in meeting these challenges. We can improve our programs’ standing and credibility by generating and sharing evidence of the value added to the community. We all need to become active in our interactions with the public, elected officials, and the regulated community. We have opportunities and obligations to seek out innovative funding sources and options. We cannot become discouraged by single or even repeated setbacks, and we should be prepared for windows of opportunity to open when least expected. I continue to be confident that our hard work, program quality, and value to the community will be recognized.

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