A Call for Diversity in Environmental Health

Diversity has increasingly become an important part of organizational operations and health.

In 2004, I received the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) Atlanta Regional Diversity Award. It was and is given annually to a deserving employee who has demonstrated a willingness to support, promote, and defend the selection and work of diverse students, employees, supervisors, clients, and customers in both work and the community. A prestigious list of recipients is hanging on a wall plaque in the U.S. EPA reception area near photos of the chain of command of top leaders, the president of the U.S., administrator of U.S. EPA, and the regional administrator. Matt Robbins, a former award recipient, quietly said to me, “Well now Priscilla, your name will be on the wall of U.S. EPA for others to see after you are gone.” I have thought about that often and that has prompted me to write this column. Diversity has increasingly become an important part of organizational operations and health.

Working with the National Council of Diversity of Environmental (N-CODE) Health, a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) project really broadened my perspective and commitment to diversity. On day one of our meeting, I sat next to Sheila Davidson Pressley, who recently passed away. She went on to become a champion, Doctor of Public Health (DrPH), and dean at EKU. Here I worked on a task force with many prominent national leaders in environmental health to promote diversity of faculty and students in colleges, universities, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), and the workforce. These are some of the giants in environmental health and many were or became leaders in NEHA. Scholarly writers of diversity in environmental health and members of NEHA, Drs. Bailus Walker, Dan Harper, and Welford C. Roberts were part of the EKU/CDC task force. Please review the current list of NEHA technical advisors (see page 44 and 45) as they are a strong reflection of the promotion of diversity in NEHA. I encourage them to join in the fight for diversity and for you to call on them to assist with the important work in our communities. We thank all for serving.

Let me be clear, minorities are included in diversity but as defined it is now broader to include persons of various backgrounds, ethnicity, age, gender, and country of origin representation. All of us are needed in environmental health, medicine, dentistry, public health, law, education, etc. Why? We need to improve the health of all, which is stated in the NEHA mission to “advance the environmental health professional for the purpose of providing a healthful environment for all.” We need to better understand all people, cultures, and living conditions to better serve human conditions. Role models are needed for others to emulate and to increase our self-worth. We need to serve all in environmental crises around the globe. We need to learn from others in far and near lands. There is a need to discover and share strategies throughout. The sky is the limit if we are inclusive. There have been some successes but we have more work to do.

In many areas, the demographics are changing. Our neighborhoods are becoming more diverse so our professions need to reflect this change in our fabric. Culture is important to reflect our needs and interests. People want to see and interact with diverse workers who understand and look like them. Environmental health is a service profession that performs inspections and conducts training. The aging workforce and early retirements are eminent and demand for us to be ready for more workers in replacement. Our environmental health workers should reflect the communities they support.

To achieve the goals of increasing diversity, it is important that we plan, recruit, train, and market the importance of the profession. We want and need good people that are inspired, well-trained, knowledgeable, technically competent, and reliable. The National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council needs our full support. Reach out to them and market to young students and professionals. Visit the campuses and offer tours to middle school, high school, and college students. A call for federal, state, and nonprofit funding to support training and college expansion of the environ-
mental health curriculum is requested. The other professions also need support to make sure that there is equity in all communities to improve overall health. Environmental health and medicine must work together. The underserved and socioeconomically deprived areas need help and should get help.

A call is issued here for all to join in this effort to develop and implement measures to improve diversity in environmental health. Create programs and projects to improve college preparation, work with recruiting faculty and students early and often. A call is made for multicultural and multigenerational efforts to enhance diversity in environmental health from middle school and K-12 to college and graduate school. Partnerships at all levels should join in on this effort. “One NEHA” that is diverse is now and our future. 

Did You Know?

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, NEHA will host an Earth Day Twitter Chat on Tuesday, April 21 from 2:00–3:00 p.m. EDT. The chat theme is “Climate Action.” Environmental health professionals work closely with communities to ensure the safety of the resources used every day, from the air we breathe to the food we eat and the water we drink. These resources are being affected by climate impacts. Take this opportunity to initiate a conversation about how climate impacts health and what we can do to fight the effects of climate change and build resilience. Join us in leading the conversation by using #ClimateChangesHealth! and #EarthDayChat. Learn more at www.neha.org.