I would like to start this column by acknowledging the members of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). Thank you for your continued membership. Throughout 2020, membership numbers remained strong at around 6,500, which is a testament to your dedication to the field of environmental health. In addition to the support of our members, we have been noticing a change in the membership that is significant.

Based on observations of the attendees at the NEHA Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in 2019 (Nashville, Tennessee), 2018 (Anaheim, California), and 2017 (Grand Rapids, Michigan), we recognize that NEHA members come from a variety of backgrounds and ethnicities. We also recognize an increase in the number of women working in the environmental health profession. It is important that we celebrate our diversity, equity, and inclusiveness of the profession. As we look at some of the leaders and innovators of the profession, we acknowledge that the environmental health profession not only continues to evolve but also welcomes contributions from all disciplines of the profession without prejudice.

Many events in 2020 have reminded us that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are not just “nice” initiatives or boxes to be check off on a “to-do list,” but rather, they are goals we should strive for. DEI is multifaceted and understanding how each element builds upon the other is important.

Diversity is the presence of differences, specifically differences in race, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and socioeconomic class, just to name a few. Diversity allows for people from different backgrounds and varying experiences to provide new perspectives that contribute to developing and refining ideas and processes.

Equity is the act of ensuring impartiality, fairness, and equal possible outcomes for everyone. To ensure equal possible outcomes, equity requires that there be recognition of barriers and advantages. In this manner, these barriers and advantages can be addressed and overcome.

Inclusion ensures that people feel a sense of belonging, which means that everyone feels comfortable and supported when it comes to being authentically themselves. Inclusion is what maintains diversity. If a person does not feel included, they will leave.

DEI promotes diverse perspectives to be heard while valuing individual differences and promoting values that minimize bias. My hope is that all NEHA members feel heard and included, and are treated equitably.

More than ever right now, with significantly changing demographics, DEI should be practiced. As we look at our workplaces, coworkers, and communities, we should strive to eliminate bias, practice inclusiveness, support diversity, and exert leadership. DEI can be reflected in mission and vision statements and incorporated in strategic plans.

When it comes to DEI, it is important to practice basic courtesy and pay attention to how you embrace nondiscriminatory practices and policies. Everyone should feel safe to voice their concerns and opinions without criticism or discrimination, which are elements that divide and destroy. As leaders, we need to help create safe environments for ideas, opinions, and points of view to be heard, as well as foster collaboration. Differences allow for creative thought, new ideas, new strategies, and new processes to be developed.

NEHA is dedicated to DEI, which means we are dedicated to efforts to create a welcoming, equitable environment that allows people of different backgrounds to succeed. Organizations progress if DEI exists. NEHA’s newest award, the Dr. Bailus Walker, Jr. Diversity and Inclusion Awareness Award, celebrates an individual or group who has made significant achievements in the development or enhancement of a diverse, inclusive, and competent environment. Dr. Walker was a long-time member and supporter of NEHA who wrote and spoke on public health, toxicology, and diversity in the field of environmental health.

Through my career I have experienced and witnessed the changes taking place in the environmental health profession. Without the diversity of creative minds, inclusion that
allows ideas to be expressed, and equity to be heard, so many of the processes and procedures we currently use—in food safety, emergency management, water, stormwater, public health, and other areas of environmental health—would not have progressed or changed.

Looking at DEI, I am proud and support all the women who have pursued environmental health as a career. Women are a growing part of all areas of the environmental health workforce, a workforce that has historically been mostly male.

As I close this column, I would like to put an “inclusion” thought in your mind. Please consider running for positions within the NEHA Board of Directors. Each August we begin the process of nominating members for open positions on the board. Members interested in participating on the board are encouraged to contact NEHA. My experience on the board has been a rewarding experience both professionally and personally. I have had the opportunity to represent members, participate in NEHA Hill Days in our nation’s capital, and make contributions to the profession.

I leave you with the following quote from Pat Wadors, former head of human resources at Linkedin: “When we listen and celebrate what is both common and different, we become a wiser, more inclusive, and better organization.”

Thank you.

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Executive Club and Above
(> $5,000)
Special invitation to the AEC President’s Reception and name in the Journal for 1 year.

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