

## ► DirecTalk



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## Triangulate the Data

“Use the pipes that are available.” The speaker’s voice rattled in my cochlea. The thread-worn reference to electronic health and medical records harkened back to the Obama era conversations centered on data. I throttled a primordial urge to enter a comment in the chat feature: “Environmental health pipes are the ones that are available.”

In a recent call with a senior federal official, I shared that environmental health data collection and reporting systems are well established, stable, and frequently the ones with the most experience at the local level. The kinks have been worked out, reflecting local and regional policies, systems, and sensibilities. Given that established presence, we should collectively lead the public health enterprise in the use of data for informed decision making. At a minimum, we can and should contribute to national discussions on data, some of which are underway.

The creation of the Centers for Forecasting and Outbreak Analytics was announced last August. This new center is meant to help predict how disease spreads and to assist in real-time interventions. It will be charged with improving the Atlanta-based agency’s data tools. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is also engaged in a Data Modernization Initiative, an effort to create an integrated, real-time public health data and surveillance system that can protect us from health threats. This iteration of the federal government is data-oriented, and we too are leaning into that conversation.

Earlier this week we submitted a new 3-year grant application for \$18 million to the Food

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and Drug Administration to create a visionary technology infrastructure centered on human and animal food safety. We proposed development of a transformational data management system and have assembled a team and partners capable of bringing that vision to life within 3 years. Our project narrative threaded each sector (i.e., state and local environmental public health, agriculture, academia, and laboratories) in the food supply chain, inclusive of One Health. We proposed designing a system that will allow data mining and artificial intelligence to create predictive analytics aimed at identifying and extinguishing the next food-borne outbreak before one needlessly harms or ends a life.

Closer to home, our organization—in collaboration with the talented people at Norden-sight, one of our IT partners—is creating an organization data lake for the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). This data ecosystem will provide us the IT architecture to import data from virtually any source and make it accessible for analysis. The potential is virtually limitless. Imagine the power of crosswalking credentialing data with environ-

mental health performance data. I can foresee analyzing exposure data with electronic health record data. Our ability to detect trends and enhance predictive analytics will grow and possibly leapfrog our association into a new era of potential in the process.

The journey into that preferred future is expensive and riddled with figurative and organizational land mines. If we elect to embark on this journey in earnest, we must stay abreast of the world around us. For example, concurrent national public health data conversations are staying on message: relevant and visionary data systems must address health equity, be cloud-based, and puncture the recalcitrant boils of data silos.

As you read this column, we will have created the architecture of our new website. Data and performance analytics will feature prominently, coupled with other useful features. There are several attributes we are interested in providing our membership. First, we desire to create a convenient user interface that centers on our common call to action and our priorities as a profession. Second, the website must be intuitive and easy to use. Third, the website should be optimized for mobile technology as an increasingly large segment of the population and our profession digest their news and perform their work from mobile devices. Fourth, our content should be fresh and valuable. I believe we are ready. We now employ six people in our association communications team, an increase from two only a few years ago.

Fifth, readily accessible staff information should be provided on the website. Members,

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when they desire to speak with staff, should know who to touch base with and how to reach them. Sixth, our website needs to be optimized for search and social media hits. That is, we ideally should appear in search engines when individuals inquiring about the profession are probing the digital universe. Please note there is texture and detail I have omitted, some of it profound, that is beyond the scope of this column. Our vision is to provide you with what you need to know and when you need to know it—all in a manner you find helpful.

Internal to NEHA, these days I inquire less about the “what” and am more focused on the “so what.” In that spirit and threading data to the website discussion, what information are professionals accessing when they visit our website and how long do they remain there? What does that mean? Are there temporal associations or patterns? Do they download our policy and position statements and if so, what are they doing with them? Extending that discussion, are our webinars well attended? Why or why not? Do individuals find value in



An old, familiar door. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

our courses and if we inquired with them one year after attendance, could course attendees describe what changed in their practice? Data will inform these discussions.

Our organization is deceiving in its complexity. Longtime members Gina Bare and Michèle Samarya-Timm recently joined our staff and have subsequently expressed astonishment at the breadth and depth of the organization’s activities. They were unaware. In the haze of meeting the expectations of busy

portfolios, I ask myself what performance data are most reasonable and useful to collect to better understand organizational efficiency and effectiveness. I have developed a personal list of my favorite attributes of association data. Are the data easy to collect? Are the data easy to understand? Are the data directional? Are the processes underlying the data amenable to intervention? Do these data represent an organizational priority?

Many of you have heard me speak or read my perspectives on data. I believe most people do not make decisions based on data. They make decisions based on their values, beliefs, and absorbed identities. Our professional data, to be useful, must be woven into stories that deeply resonate with decision makers on a personal level. That is a whole different column.

I feel we are at a threshold, an old and familiar one centered on data. If we elect to open that door, let us start with the pipes that are available to demonstrate the full potential of our profession. 🐼

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## 2022 Walter F. Snyder Award

### Call for Nominations Nomination deadline is May 14, 2022

Given in honor of NSF International’s cofounder and first executive director, the Walter F. Snyder Award recognizes outstanding leadership in public health and environmental health protection. The annual award is presented jointly by NSF International and the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA).



Nominations for the 2022 Walter F. Snyder Award are being accepted for environmental health professionals achieving peer recognition for:

- Outstanding accomplishments in environmental and public health protection.
  - Notable contributions to protection of environment and quality of life.
- Demonstrated capacity to work with all interests in solving environmental health challenges.
- Participation in development and use of voluntary consensus standards for public health and safety.
  - Leadership in securing action on behalf of environmental and public health goals.



Past recipients of the Walter F. Snyder Award include:

2021: Kevin Smith	2011: Gary P. Noonan	2000: Friedrich K. Kaefenstein	1990: Harvey F. Collins	1980: Ray B. Watts
2020: Joseph Cotruvo	2010: James Balsamo, Jr.	1999: Khalil H. Mancy	1989: Boyd T. Marsh	1979: John G. Todd
2019: LCDR Katie Bante	2009: Terrance B. Gratten	1998: Chris J. Wiant	1988: Mark D. Hollis	1978: Larry J. Gordon
2018: Brian Zamora	2008: CAPT Craig A. Shepherd	1997: J. Roy Hickman	1987: George A. Kupfer	1977: Charles C. Johnson, Jr.
2017: CAPT Wendy Fanaselle	2007: Wilfried Kreisel	1996: Robert M. Brown	1986: Albert H. Brunwasser	1975: Charles L. Senn
2016: Steve Tackitt	2006: Arthur L. Banks	1995: Leonard F. Rice	1985: William G. Walter	1974: James J. Jump
2015: Ron Grimes	2005: John B. Conway	1994: Nelson E. Fabian	1984: William Nix Anderson	1973: William A. Broadway
2014: Priscilla Oliver	2004: Peter D. Thornton	1993: Amer El-Ahraf	1983: John R. Bagby, Jr.	1972: Ralph C. Pickard
2013: Vincent J. Radke	2002: Gayle J. Smith	1992: Robert Galvan	1982: Emil T. Chanlett	1971: Callis A. Atkins
2012: Harry E. Grenawitzke	2001: Robert W. Powitz	1991: Trenton G. Davis	1981: Charles H. Gillham	

The 2022 Walter F. Snyder Award will be presented during the NEHA 2022 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition being held in Spokane, Washington, June 28–July 1, 2022.



For more information or to download a nomination form, please visit  
[www.nsf.org](http://www.nsf.org) or [www.neha.org](http://www.neha.org) or contact Stan Hazan at NSF International at (734) 769-5105 or [hazan@nsf.org](mailto:hazan@nsf.org).

