

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Roy Kroeger, REHS

What Are You Doing to Make a Difference?

*I challenge you
to make a difference.*

The past year has gone by so quickly and I am writing my final column as president of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). During the past year, I have had the opportunity to attend the American Public Health Association (APHA) conference, several state environmental health association conferences, and an in-person board meeting that my predecessor was not so fortunate to do. I am thankful for these opportunities, even though the year did not turn out as I had envisioned. When I ran to be your NEHA president, I had planned to meet people around the country, talk about the great ideas of other professionals, and share the lessons I learned. Though I am saddened that I could not do as much as I had hoped, I still met many great professionals this year.

During the meetings that I attended, one of the common topics discussed was the lack of understanding of what environmental health professionals do. So many great people are out there doing their jobs and wondering why they never received a thank you or even an acknowledgement when their nursing counterparts in local health departments are getting the credit. Repeatedly I was asked what NEHA was doing or what we could do to improve recognition of the environmental health profession. This question was also not lost on the NEHA Board of Directors this year. Many of us are asking the same questions internally. NEHA has made some progress promoting the profession this year; we have hired a well-qualified marketing team and were able to have some U.S. representatives and senators mention environmental health in Congress

and around the country. What NEHA has not been able to do yet is to convince our members and members of the profession to help themselves. NEHA will be focusing on this area in the near future.

This year was an eye-opener in many ways. I have learned that our profession has some of the greatest minds practicing the profession when it comes to solving problems, yet we do not know how to talk about ourselves. In many ways, we are an extremely apathetic group. I hear that we are too busy to promote environmental health or that we are not allowed to talk about environmental health to legislators or other lawmakers. I have seen in many cases that we do not even want to talk about ourselves to other public health professionals. This problem is systemic from federal government agencies down to the smallest local health departments. It is also a problem in our state and regional affiliate associations. Please do not get me wrong, there are places where we are doing yeoman's work, but going the extra mile needs to become systemic in the other direction.

Before I get too preachy, I understand that some of us still have travel restrictions and many state budgets are stretched. Yet, I have also heard that many local health departments are currently flush with funds they do

not know how they are going to spend. At the NEHA 2022 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition this summer and in other means in the future, we will create a tool kit to help you promote yourself. NEHA does not have the staff to work with all your councils, commissioners, and boards of health. We also do not have the budget to run national media campaigns to tell the public what we do and why we do it.

Our profession needs to become bold and willing to step up to the plate when doing things for ourselves. I recently heard from a great professional and friend who said, "Why? Nobody cares!" At a recent joint conference of APHA and NEHA state affiliates, I also heard that no one from the environmental health side attended. Are we staying at home because no one plays nice with us, or is it because we have our petty differences preventing us from flying high? Whatever the reason, we need to step up. My friend was correct in a way—society is wrapped up in its own problems and unless we participate in our own way, we will never break that barrier between them and us.

Environmental health is public health; we created public health, not nursing or community health. At a time when most people attributed sickness to superstition and the wrath of the gods, Hippocrates taught that all forms of illness had a natural cause. Nearly 2,500 years later, environmental health professionals are still on the front lines of prevention. Hygiene and sanitation have been the single biggest contributor to increased lifespans. We should be shouting this fact from the rooftops. We should be talking to policy makers at all levels. We should be talk-

ing to junior high and high school students to spark career interests or create awareness. We should participate in science fairs. We should be making YouTube and TikTok videos to make people aware. We should be posting pictures on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

We should also be calling our local TV and radio stations and telling them about what we are doing. Many reporters have to search for stories every morning and we can use this opportunity to our advantage. Newspapers are fighting to remain relevant in a world where the internet, TV, and radio always

beat them to the story. We could help them out by giving them something fresh to write about. Civic groups are another place to get the word out. Create an exciting story and present it at Lions, Kiwanis, or other group meetings; they are always looking for guest speakers from the community.

Please do not say you are not allowed to do these things. In some cases that may be true, but it is more likely that someone before you just said you could not talk in public so that they would not have to do it. If you want to speak to others, ask your supervisors and directors.

As I close my final column, I challenge you to make a difference. If you are unsure how to act, email me and we can talk. If you have the ability to come to Spokane, Washington, this summer for the 2022 AEC, please do so. I promise there will be additional information on this topic and many others at the AEC.

We are in this profession and struggle together, be the difference! 🐛

Ray Knuge
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SUPPORT THE NEHA ENDOWMENT FOUNDATION

The NEHA Endowment Foundation was established to enable NEHA to do more for the environmental health profession than its annual budget might allow. Special projects and programs supported by the foundation will be carried out for the sole purpose of advancing the profession and its practitioners.

Individuals who have contributed to the foundation are listed below by club category. These listings are based on what people have actually donated to the foundation—not what they have pledged. Names will be published under the appropriate category for 1 year; additional contributions will move individuals to a different category in the following year(s). For each of the categories, there are a number of ways NEHA recognizes and thanks contributors to the foundation. If you are interested in contributing to the Endowment Foundation, please call NEHA at (303) 756-9090. You can also donate online at www.neha.org/donate.

Thank you.

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