

NEHA NEWS

NEHA Goes to Washington, DC, for Second Annual Hill Day

By Joanne Zurcher (jjzurcher@neha.org)

On May 1, 2018, NEHA's board of directors descended on Washington, DC, to visit Capitol Hill to advocate for NEHA members and the environmental health profession. The board spent the day meeting with U.S. Congress staff from the Senate and House of Representatives. In total, over 43 offices from both political parties were visited to ensure that the environmental health profession is at the table when it comes to major policy decisions. "Hill Day provides a potent opportunity to communicate the value of the environmental health profession directly to key political decision makers and influencers," stated NEHA Executive Director Dr. David Dyjack.

The major focus of the meetings was to highlight to the highest level of influencers why we work as credentialed environmental health professionals and the importance of a credentialed environmental health workforce to protect public health and safety. NEHA board members discussed the importance of having national guidelines so that every state has a credentialed environmental health workforce. As NEHA President-Elect Sandra Long put it, "Hill Day was a wonderful opportunity to put a face on environmental health and provide education on the profession and its issues."

NEHA board members and staff then asked members of Congress for their support of the Environmental Health Workforce Act (HR 1909 and S 2616), which were introduced by Representative Brenda Lawrence (D-Michigan) and Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-Michigan), respectively. These two pieces of legislation will ensure that the 22 states currently not requiring credentials for those doing environmental health work to start credentialing this workforce. Many staffers on both sides of the political aisle expressed deep interest in learning more about the bills and promised to discuss the legislation with their elected officials. "With our lobbying efforts this May, NEHA's board of directors has moved from accepting what is given to environmental health to playing an active role of our profession's future," commented NEHA Second Vice-President Roy Kroeger.

Also discussed during these meetings was the importance of funding the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (NCEH/ATSDR). NCEH/ATSDR is a critical partner with NEHA in developing national environmental health programs. NEHA board members told stories about how NCEH/ATSDR work helps in every aspect of public health and improves environmental health throughout the country. NEHA is committed to educating Washington, DC, influencers about the importance of funding NCEH/ATSDR at the highest levels for fiscal year 2019 and beyond.



NEHA board of directors and staff in front of the steps of the U.S. Capitol Building. From left to right: Tim Hatch, Vince Radke, David Dyjack, Sharon Smith, Sandra Long, Joanne Zurcher, Larry Ramdin, Tom Vyles, Roy Kroeger, Matthew Reighter, Priscilla Oliver, Adam London, James Speckhart, and Lynne Madison. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

Finally, this year is critical for the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act. The original law was created to improve the nation's public health and medical preparedness and response capabilities for emergencies, whether deliberate, accidental, or natural. This year it needs to be reauthorized as it is scheduled to sunset at the end of September. A bipartisan group of senators is working diligently to pass the reauthorization with environmental health in the bill. This win is huge for NEHA's government affairs program.

Board members demonstrated NEHA's support of this bill by explaining to U.S. Congress staff that environmental health professionals are second responders in a crisis, highlighting environmental health's role through their own experiences during a crisis. NEHA requested that the House of Representatives and Senate pass the reauthorization this year as it is currently being drafted in the Senate. "It is powerful and rewarding to see our elected officials realize that environmental health is part of our national security. The nation is not safe so long as we allow preventable illnesses and injuries to continue unchecked. NEHA's Second Annual Hill Day challenged elected officials to think about environmental health as a national priority," commented NEHA Past-President Adam London.

It was great to see the comradery among the board members and the shared goal of telling U.S. Congress staff why they are passionate about environmental health. NEHA Region 5 Vice-President Tom Vyles shared, "Hill Day was rewarding for the opportunity it presented to explain environmental health to people who previously had little understanding. Seeing the revelations come across their faces was gratifying." In addition, NEHA Region 7 Vice-President Tim Hatch stated "Exercising our ability to discuss envi-

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NEHA Region 1 Vice-President Matthew Reighter discusses the importance of environmental health with Leonardo Rodriguez, congressional fellow for Representative Jared Polis (D-Colorado). Photo courtesy of Kristie Denbrock.

ronmental health topics with lawmakers one-on-one in the place where decisions are made was a monumental day for NEHA.”

“NEHA’s Hill Day events last year and this year were 20 years in the making. I wish us to remember Professor James ‘Jim’ English, a prominent voice that urged NEHA to have a presence in Washington, DC, on behalf of its members. NEHA now has that presence,” stated NEHA President Vince Radke. As we put this important event to bed for another year, I am grateful for all the support of our board and staff who took the time participate in NEHA’s Second Annual Hill Day. Until next year, NEHA’s government affairs program will continue to ensure that the environmental health profession has a voice in Washington, DC. 🗺️



A quick pause in front of the Hart Senate Office Building sign before heading off to meet with U.S. Congress staff. From left to right: David Dyjack, Roy Kroeger, James Speckhart, Sandra Long, Vince Radke, and Adam London. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.



NEHA staff and board members Joanne Zurcher, Vince Radke, and Adam London (left to right) emphasize the necessity of the Environmental Health Workforce Act. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.



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