Nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion are among the most important elements that influence organizational change, direction, and success. Many organizations neglect or minimize the importance and benefits of these organizational elements and fail to make them part of their administrative or operational assessments, much less strategic planning. Understanding diversity and inclusion in organizations helps develop and support the changes needed to elevate equality and create an organization that fully utilizes employee talents and portfolio skillsets (Roberson, 2006).

In the seminal article, “Uncovering Environmental Health: An Initial Assessment of the Profession’s Health Department Workforce and Practice,” issues such as challenges, characteristics, leadership, and demographics of the 21st century environmental health workforce were identified (Gerding et al., 2019). Among many notable highlights included was that minorities in environmental health departments are not proportionately reflective of the environmental health workforce as a whole, especially in management and leadership roles. In addition, half of all respondents were ≥46 years. These disparities, although not surprising, illustrate that interaction, representative integration, and inclusion in environmental health are no longer driven by regulatory mandates. Instead, a socially and culturally driven mandate that bears direct relationship to the 360° perception of the environmental health profession’s commitment to the future is needed.

To that end, Dr. Priscilla Oliver, National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) immediate past-president, initiated a call to action in an effort to “develop and implement
measures to improve diversity in environmental health” (Oliver, 2019). Driven by Dr. Oliver’s challenge, the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) chair and chair-elect ruminated on the rallying cry as to how it might apply to AAS. Subsequent to research, the chairs presumed that a few introspective first steps were necessary to create a path for AAS to improve diversity and inclusion in its administration, operations, and membership. AAS does not have a formal nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion policy or statement; however, AAS does have a bylaw statement related to nondiscrimination in its membership section.

After some background inquiries, it became apparent that AAS had not conducted a diversity assessment to determine what current policy and status look like, how or if policy is applied, or what diversity and inclusion should look like within the organization and among its membership. By contrast, NEHA’s executive director has made concerted and fruitful efforts to educate and advocate for nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion over the last 5 years and has changed the diversity landscape within NEHA. This might, at least in part, be responsible for increased productivity within the organization and most certainly increased membership. Dr. Oliver’s call to action is an extension of this effort.

In August 2020, subsequent to the AAS annual board meeting, a Respect, Integrity, Service, and Equality (RISE) Task Force consisting of the AAS executive secretary and approximately six past and/or present governance board members and diplomats will be appointed by the AAS chair. Appointees will be considered for nomination (self or otherwise) by a nomination letter of interest and qualification form. Favored considerations for nominees include those who are thought leaders, diverse in opinion, and independent in thought, as well as having varied backgrounds and experiences and understand that aggregated outcomes result in better decisions (Surowiecki, 2004). Once the RISE Task Force has been seated, a chair will be elected for governance and as a point of contact to the AAS board. The RISE Task Force will meet as often as necessary for 8 months and will affect the following:

- Conduct an objective assessment of the current state of diversity and inclusion in AAS, strategically determine desired outcome for the future, and recommend a path forward. Conducting an internal assessment and analyses of a familiar organization might provide critical insight pertaining to diversity practices and status, as well as shortcomings in various program areas (Harvey & Allard, 2015). When conducting assessments, Kalev and coauthors (2006) note three approaches that might be considered key in promoting and increasing diversity within organizations: 1) establishing a responsible lead in diversity, 2) reducing isolation and increasing emphasis on women and minorities, and 3) temper managerial bias through training and educational feedback. These approaches help limit stereotyping and discriminatory actions/practices and help organizations achieve strategic goals. The information gathered from such an assessment can serve as a tool in constructing guidance and a way forward to improve diversity within an organization.

- Create, adopt, and implement an inward-looking nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion policy. The policy will apply to AAS employment and membership and will ultimately be adopted and integrated into AAS bylaws.

- Create, adopt, and implement an outward-facing nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion statement. The statement will specifically address the value of nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion to the environmental health profession. This statement will become a part of AAS values and with optimism, guide and encourage other environmental health professional associations and perhaps, the profession itself. In the end, the RISE Task Force will have examined common values, beliefs, identities, objectives, and missions for the organization, its culture, and the profession. With regard to nondiscrimination, diversity, and inclusion, the RISE Task Force will have asked: Who are we? What do we look like? What/who do we represent? What are our perceptions and priorities versus our realities?

Importantly, by this time in 2021, the RISE Task Force and AAS should be comfortable showing that the status quo was assessed, challenged, and changed for the benefit of AAS and the environmental health profession.

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References