

▶ DIRECT FROM AAS



Brian Collins, MS, REHS, DAAS
Wendell A. Moore, MS, EdD,
RS/REHS, DAAS

RISE to the Call: Nondiscrimination, Diversity, and Inclusion

Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purpose of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

Due to review and publication timelines, the text for this column was submitted to the *Journal* in early May. As such, the contents of this column were drafted prior to the national and worldwide movement against racism occurring at time of press. AAS will be conducting a self-assessment of internal and external positions in regard to diversity and inclusion. In addition, AAS will be signing-on to a letter addressing racism and its effect on environmental health. This letter is being led by NEHA and will include sign-ons from other environmental health organizations. When finalized, this letter will be posted on the NEHA website (www.neha.org) and AAS website (www.sanitarrians.org). The information and conclusions presented in this column are those of the author(s) and does not necessarily represent the views or official positions of AAS, NEHA, or author affiliations.

Brian Collins is the chair-elect of AAS, a past president of NEHA, former director of environmental health, and a registered environmental health specialist for over 30 years. Wendell A. Moore is the chair of AAS, a retired U.S. Army colonel, and a registered environmental health specialist/registered sanitarian for over 30 years.

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 have 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 we are? 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. 🌱

Corresponding Author: Brian Collins, Chair-Elect, American Academy of Sanitarians; Past President, National Environmental Health Association. E-mail: brianc82@gmail.com.

References

- Gerding, J.A., Landeen, E., Kelly, K.R., Whitehead, S., Dyjack, D.T., Sarisky, J., & Brooks, B.W. (2019). Uncovering environmental health: An initial assessment of the profession’s health department workforce and practice. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 81(10), 24–33. Retrieved from <https://www.neha.org/node/60738>
- Harvey, C.P., & Allard, M.J. (2015). *Understanding and managing diversity: Readings, cases, and exercises* (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: Pearson.
- Kalev, A., Dobbin, F., & Kelly, E. (2006). Best practices or best guesses? Assessing the efficacy of corporate affirmative action and diversity policies. *American Sociological Review*, 71(4), 589–617.
- Oliver, P. (2020). A call for diversity in environmental health. *Journal of Environmental Health*, 82(8), 6–7.
- Roberson, Q.M. (2006). Disentangling the meanings of diversity and inclusion in organizations. *Group & Organization Management*, 31(2), 212–236.
- Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The wisdom of crowds: Why the many are smarter than the few and how collective wisdom shapes business, economies, societies, and nations*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Did You Know?

You can stay in the loop every day with NEHA’s social media. Find NEHA on

- Facebook: www.facebook.com/NEHA.org
- Twitter: <https://twitter.com/nehorg>
- LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/company/national-environmental-health-association