

► **DirectTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

Pull the Red Wagon

*We must
claim our space.*

The electronic message from the Food and Drug Administration arrived after midnight Eastern Time last night. Our association has been awarded a 3-year, \$40 million cooperative agreement to advance the knowledge, skills, and abilities of National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) members and others who are engaged in the retail food safety regulatory sphere. Since the arrival of the award letter, 12 hours have passed and my mind is twisted and contorted with the prospect of the amount of work involved in launching this effort.

While a major grant is good news, we have other initiatives under development intended to recognize the impactful progress being achieved by dedicated environmental health professionals. Let us begin by reviewing some of newer opportunities for recognition and note that the deadline for 2021 submissions will have passed by the time you read this column.

First, there is the Dr. Bailus Walker, Jr. Diversity and Inclusion Awareness Award. This award will be presented annually to recognize an individual or group who has made significant achievements in the development or enhancement of a more culturally diverse, inclusive, and competent environment. The qualified individual or group will demonstrate support for diversity in their organization and community.

The second major award is notable because it recognizes our members with accolades and cash. Our association, in partnership with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and

Disease Registry, is recognizing environmental health heroes who have used innovative environmental health services or practice strategies to improve the health and wellness of their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Environmental health practitioners have been on the front lines of this pandemic, working tirelessly to not only slow the spread of COVID-19 but also carry out essential environmental health work in new, different, safer, or more efficient ways. We want to profile these health department teams that are using new and creative solutions that can forever change the way we do environmental public health and offer awards between \$500 and \$10,000, depending on the number of applicants.

We also have our usual stable of esteemed awards. We recognize stellar lifetime contributions through our Walter S. Mangold Award, and in partnership with NSF International, the Walter F. Snyder Award. These awards, along with the Samuel J. Crumrine Consumer Protection Award, are widely considered some of the most prestigious in the U.S. We have a trove of others. In collaboration with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development we offer the Healthy Housing Awards, as well as scholarships in collaboration with the American Academy of Sanitarians and the Joe Beck Education

Contribution Award for excellence in educational contributions. Each of these awards showcases the exceptional performance in our profession.

What do these awards generally have in common? Each year we have difficulty securing a suitable pool of qualified applicants. We try social media. We make announcements in our E-News. We use word of mouth. We start early and keep the nomination process open late. The results generally are anemic. Not just this year but every year.

You might be thinking I am going to chastise you about the volume of award nominees. Not true. In fact, this month's column is intended to be more self-reflective. What are we doing wrong? The Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs gave me an award a few years ago that I prominently showcase in my house. I am overwhelmed to this day. Dr. Jason Marion secured Kentucky Colonel status for me. I framed that signed declaration and have it proudly displayed in my home office. I don't think I'm unusual.

Are we so busy that we can't invest a few minutes to nominate our deserving colleagues for recognition? Are we collectively too modest? Is NEHA not doing a good job promoting or showcasing these opportunities? Some combination of the above or something different?

Please allow me to scale this discussion up a bit and possibly be a little controversial. I believe our profession is by nature modest and distracted by the interesting science that envelops us. For many of us, our work is

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a calling, not a job or a career. The accolades and public acclaim are secondary to our interests, which is killing us.

If I see or hear one more unqualified physician on TV, Twitter, or the radio pontificating on the safety of pandemic dining, travel, or returning to school, I am going to go ballistic. These people are talking heads who in most cases are filling a void of our own creation. I do not question their competence as clinicians or commitment to the public health enterprise. I question their expertise in environmental health. We must claim our space.

The NEHA Board of Directors has expressed to me their desire that this association do more to advocate for the profession. While I feel we have made substantial progress in recent years, I agree with them. The question is what does that look like in practice? How do we sustainably support that endeavor? How do we make that advocacy effective in over 3,000 regulatory jurisdictions, our affiliated U.S. territories, the uniformed services, and the private sector, the latter of which comprise an increasingly larger segment of our association membership?

The core of this conundrum is anchored in my earlier observations about the awards. If we don't take time to recognize and congratulate ourselves for a job well done, then



Retail food is a growing priority for the National Environmental Health Association. Photo courtesy of David Dyjack.

are we surprised that the medical profession has grabbed the spotlight and has become the focal point for health issues? Environmental health is a local issue. We need to own the local press and social networks. We need to own our professional self-recognition. We need to rally around ourselves because no one else is going to do it for us.

We have embarked on an association rebranding journey. This endeavor will likely

lead to a new logo and a new identity. I hope we can instill a growing and revitalized sense of pride in our profession. It is time to remove that invisibility cloak that has shrouded us in secrecy for far too long. 🐼

Dave

ddyjack@neha.org
Twitter: @DTDyjack



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