New Study Identifies Challenges and Research Opportunities for Environmental Health Professionals

December 4, 2019 – *Environmental Health Perspectives* published a new article today, “Environmental Health Practice Challenges and Research Needs for U.S. Health Departments.” The article aims to identify priority challenges and related research needs to catalyze effective delivery of essential environmental health services for common environmental health program areas in U.S. health departments. The article explores new findings and builds on the innovative *Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health* (UNCOVER EH) initiative.

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and Baylor University partnered on the unprecedented UNCOVER EH initiative in 2017. UNCOVER EH collected information from more than 1,700 environmental health professionals in health departments across the nation. The initiative sought to assess and improve the profession and practice of environmental health.

Environmental health professionals are strategically positioned to identify and intervene to help prevent public health threats affecting local communities. As such, they represent a critical segment of the public health workforce. The authors adopted a horizon scanning approach to thematically analyze the survey responses and held facilitated focus groups to gather input from environmental health professionals working at health departments about their practice, work, and challenges. Environmental health professionals reported challenges in the following six areas that affect their ability to deliver essential services in their community: 1) drinking water quality, 2) wastewater management, 3) healthy homes, 4) food safety, 5) vectors and public health pests, and 6) emerging issues. Addressing these challenges through partnerships, training, and research can build a stronger environmental health workforce for the future.

“Local environmental health professionals have a broad range of responsibilities — including inspecting many types of facilities, from restaurants to swimming pools,” said Erik R. Svendsen, PhD, Director of CDC’s Division of Environmental Health Science and Practice. “Helping them address the challenges involved in carrying out their duties fits squarely within our Division’s work to support environmental health professionals and programs serving states, tribes, counties, cities, and territories.”

“Environmental health professionals work tirelessly to protect the health of our families, friends, and neighbors, but an understanding of the complex and evolving challenges they face and research needed to advance their practice has remained elusive,” said Dr. Bryan W. Brooks, distinguished professor (of?) at Baylor University. “This timely and critically important article provides a clarion call to strengthen the
delivery of essential environmental public health services through strategic academic and professional
training, nontraditional partnerships, and translational research activities."

“Environmental health professionals play a central role in the health, safety, and security of every U.S.
resident,” said Dr. David Dyjack, Executive Director of NEHA. “This seminal research shines a light on the
path forward as we enter an era defined by the need to make increasingly complex and dynamic decisions
that will affect the health of our families.”

Learn about the challenges and recommendations for the environmental health workforce in more
detail in the full published article. Additional resources for the article include a visual abstract, which
provides descriptive findings from the article. Previously published work on UNCOVER EH highlighting
the demographics, characteristics, education and training, practice areas, and aspects of leadership and
satisfaction among the environmental health workforce can be accessed here.

Based on the critical role played by the environmental health workforce, it is important to understand
the challenges they face and the research needed to advance environmental health practice in the
future. Comprehensive studies like UNCOVER EH provide a landscape view of the practice that informs
workforce development opportunities and needs to support the progression of the profession. Findings
from this newly published article offer a path for advancing environmental health practice in the United
States.

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About NEHA

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) was established in 1937 to advance the
environmental health professional for the purpose of providing a healthful environmental for all.
Currently serving over 6,000 members, NEHA empowers and educates these professionals, providing the
tools and resources they need to make the greatest contributions possible in creating healthy
environments that we all seek. Twitter: @NEHAorg

About Baylor University

Baylor University is a private Christian university and a nationally ranked research institution. The
university provides a vibrant campus community for more than 17,000 students by blending
interdisciplinary research with an international reputation for educational excellence and a faculty
commitment to teaching and scholarship. Chartered in 1845 by the Republic of Texas through the efforts
of Baptist pioneers, Baylor is the oldest continually operating university in Texas. Located in Waco,
Baylor welcomes students from all 50 states and more than 90 countries to study a broad range of
degrees among its 12 nationally recognized academic divisions.