

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

David Dyjack, DrPH, CIH

At our Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition in Orlando, Florida, I publicly committed to you that we would have a presence in Washington, DC, by the end of the year. I kept my promise. With great pleasure allow me to introduce Joanne Zurcher, MPP, our new director of government affairs. Joanne is a physical and symbolic manifestation of our commitment to professionally represent your interests at the highest levels of government. She is based in Washington, DC. I'm pleased to have her "hijack" my column this month so that she can talk directly to you regarding this exciting new endeavor.

Greetings from Washington, DC! Congressman John Dingell, who served for over 40 years in the House of Representatives, famously said of Washington, DC, "If you aren't at the table, you are on the menu." Washington, DC, is a tough town where everyone thinks their issue is the top priority. With the opening of a DC office, NEHA has taken a first step in the process of claiming its seat at the table and leading the nation to better environmental health.

This couldn't have happened at a more opportune time as 2016 is a critical year for legislation. This may come as a surprise to some since it's an election year and there will be a new president and Congress after November. As Washington, DC, insiders know, however, every incoming administration wants to start a host of new initiatives in its first 100 days in office, when it has momentum generated from the recent election. The only successful way

It's a Government Affair

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to keep that pace is to review what has been debated, discussed, and garnered political support during the previous Congress. It's for this reason that 2016 could not be a more important time to introduce NEHA to Congress and start the ball rolling toward increased appropriations for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health, Toxic Substance Control Act reauthorization, Food Safety Modernization Act, and others.

As a policy wonk and health care political junkie with 20-plus years in Washington, DC, politics, I am thrilled to be joining the NEHA family. I have worked for clients making them thought-leaders in Washington, DC, and protecting their interests on Capitol Hill; assisted the Health Resources and Services

Administration in navigating the Affordable Care Act (ACA) debate and worked with the Department of Health and Human Services in implementation of ACA; helped nonprofits increase their appropriations and stature in Washington, DC; and worked as senior staff for two members of Congress. I have my master's degree in public health and international relations policy.

Using my political expertise, especially my skills in and with the executive and legislative branches, I will get your stories and experiences in environmental health in front of key decision makers. Together, with the national office at the helm, we will be an unstoppable team.

But I can't do it without you! I will need your data and best practices. And even more important, I want to know if your mother's best friend's neighbor or you have relationships of any kind with folks in Congress, the current administration, or the presidential candidates. These relationships—even if you think they are inconsequential or that they will never remember you—can be a game changer for our advocacy.

As for the data and stories, I'm looking to build a compelling narrative about how your work has improved the lives of people in your community. Success stories and lessons learned from the field are critical to my work. If we can tell members of Congress that we could have done "X" before the city of Flint changed its water supply to the Flint River or provided 9/11 first responders with "Y" before rescue and recovery efforts in New

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York City, they'll sit up and pay attention. Before policy can be made you have to paint a picture about how a problem gets solved. Help me do that and we'll be well on our way to making a difference.

Remember, change is never easy, nor is it fast. If we work together, however, we can bring about real change in the way our country, leaders in DC, and friends rely on NEHA for the final word in environmental health.

Thank you, Joanne, for sharing your thoughts and visions! We are excited to see what you accomplish on our behalf. Check out next month's column where you will hear from our new director of programs, who is also based in Washington, DC. 🐶

Dave

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Did You Know?

NEHA hosted a day-long forum in January that brought together experts from the fields of private information technology, local and state environmental health departments, and federal agencies to discuss environmental health informatics as a first step in providing support to smaller-scale environmental health departments to enable the adoption of informatics systems.