



National Environmental Health Association

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The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) represents more than 6,700 governmental, private, academic, and uniformed services sector environmental health professionals in the U.S. and its territories and internationally. NEHA is the profession's strongest advocate for excellence in the practice of environmental health as it delivers on its mission to build, sustain, and empower an effective environmental health workforce.

Role of Environmental Health in Addressing Racism as an Environmental Health Issue

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According to Dr. Camara Jones, "Racism is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call 'race'), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources" (American Public Health Association, 2020).

The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) acknowledges that racism is a threat to public health. It threatens public health through fostering race-based differences in access to and quality of healthcare. Racism can be found at the center of poverty and limited employment opportunities, poor investment in education, and adverse environmental exposures. Racism fuels health disparities—the systemic consequences of social determinants of health. For example, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has exposed how health disparities and higher pollution exposures may contribute to excess COVID-19 mortality among Blacks. In addition, COVID-19 has exposed health disparities in Native American populations that are exacerbated by challenges in the delivery of environmental health services, including access to clean water.

Key services provided by environmental health professionals are undermined by racism. As a result, not all populations have benefitted equally from national improvements to air and water quality or food safety. Therefore, NEHA recognizes that racism hinders its members from fully carrying out its mission to "advance the environmental health professional with the purpose of providing a healthful environment for all."

NEHA recommends that environmental health professionals address structural and systemic racism that hinder the delivery of environmental health services to the most vulnerable populations.

To accomplish this endeavor, NEHA recommends the following action agenda for federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial governmental agencies:

- **Environmental health agencies should adopt statements on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.** To be most effective, these statements are encouraged to be developed collaboratively and with consideration for how the values can be applied to daily operations.

These statements should represent core values of the agency and allow for the adoption of practices that focus on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion for those employed within the agency and the constituencies they serve (National Council of Nonprofits, 2020).

- **Uphold environmental justice.** Race is the single most predictive factor in the location of hazardous facilities (Bullard, Mohai, Saha, & Wright, 2008). Upholding environmental justice admonishes race as a factor in the distribution of dangerous environmental burdens. Environmental justice requires the meaningful involvement of all people in the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency [U.S. EPA], 2020).
- **Environmental health agencies should utilize a Health in All Policies (HiAP) framework to inform decision-making.** HiAP is a collaborative, data-driven approach to public policies across sectors that systematically considers the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts in order to improve population health and health equity. HiAP is a collaborative effort to improve the health of all people by integrating health in decision-making across sectors and policy areas.
- **Environmental health agencies should require justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion training for staff.** Instituting effective trainings on diversity can build staff awareness as well as change attitudes and behavior, allowing the environmental health workforce to better serve their constituencies through a health equity lens. Instituting an internal culture that values differences will manifest externally in the communities served.
- **Environmental health agencies should employ hiring practices that encourage diversity in the workforce.** Over 80% of the environmental health workforce (Gerding et al., 2019) and 70% of the public health workforce is nondiverse (Sellers et al., 2015). This information suggests that the environmental health workforce, more so than the greater public health workforce, is often distinctly demographically different than the populations it serves. In addition to hiring practices, agencies must put into practice strong retention strategies and ensure opportunities for senior and executive leadership among diverse candidates.

Analysis

Environmental health professionals have an essential role to play in upholding environmental justice. Environmental health has long provided interventions to improve air quality, water quality, and food safety. The gains in life expectancy and quality of life, however, are undermined if not all people benefit from the gains. The intersection between systematic structures of racism and environmental health can leave people of color disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards. A recent study on air quality showed racial disparities in exposure to particulate matter with non-Whites having a 1.28 times higher burden and Black residents, in particular, having a 1.54 times higher burden than the overall population (Mikati, Benson, Luben, Sacks, & Richmond-Bryant, 2018). The racial disparities noted in this study are linked to poor health outcomes and increased morbidity and mortality.

Environmental health professionals protect and enhance the health and well-being of all, and that means placing a special focus on people who suffer marginalization and discrimination. The public health field has been fighting health disparities that burden people of color for decades and the environmental justice movement has exposed environmental factors that fuel disparities. The

environmental justice movement that started in the 1960s sought to address the inequity of environmental protection in communities of color (U.S. EPA, 2020). Communities of color disproportionately experience severe environmental injustice including issues related to the following: built environment, food deserts, gentrification, exposure to hazards, dilapidated infrastructure, health disparities, and systemic racism. These disparities lead to health and environmental crises that are racially motivated. The systems of oppression that play a role in the mortality of marginalized communities are perpetuating environmental injustice.

In the Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH) Initiative, a disproportionately high percentage (86%) of environmental health professionals indicated their race as White (Gerding et al, 2019). Environmental justice is at the core of racism as an environmental health issue. Yet, the workforce is not representative of the marginalized and oppressed communities of color. This lack of representation in the environmental health workforce presents a deficit of valued skills, inherent knowledge, and abilities needed to connect with diverse communities. Dr. Welford Roberts, a past president of NEHA, states that diversity in the environmental health workforce is important to the success of environmental health services in communities and that the environmental health workforce should reflect the communities it supports (Roberts, 2009). Achieving a more diverse environmental health workforce provides a better understanding of differences in cultures, beliefs, and attitudes toward environmental health and potentially increases community engagement, communication, and inclusivity. Environmental health professionals have an opportunity to address the social injustices and systemic changes that are needed.

The environmental health field emerges from the broader public health field. We must call attention to the linkage of social determinants of health and health equity. We must apply a health equity lens when discussing the environmental health concerns that marginalized communities face. Within the environmental health profession, we must acknowledge the need for adhering to diverse hiring practices, identifying opportunities for cultural competency training, combating implicit biases, and combating systemic racism.

Justification

Developing Statements on Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Issuing values statements on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion can contribute to a culture of inclusion and equity, as well as broaden awareness. These statements can enable diversity to be integrated into the structure of the mission and vision of an agency. The Green 2.0 Working Group calls for institutionalizing diversity, equity, and inclusion goals through their reflection in mission statements, workplans, funding requests, etc. The working group researched environmental institutions on diversity and found that interviewed environmental professionals felt that “diversity, equity, and inclusion should be core values that are included in the mission statements of environmental organizations” (Taylor, 2014). As part of a diversity plan, it is recommended that these statements move beyond compliance with federal and state laws and move toward ensuring effective engagement in diversity (Beasley, 2017).

Upholding Environmental Justice

Environmental exposures among the population are not experienced equally. Environmental injustices such as inequitable distribution of hazardous waste storage and processing facilities, wastewater treatment plants, and power plants have been well documented in the U.S. (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2015). Brown and Black communities are often the victims of decades of

environmental mismanagement with these communities experiencing higher rates of chronic diseases such as cancer and heart and lung diseases that can be linked to environmental exposures (Gee & Payne-Sturges, 2004).

Louisiana offers a crucial example of how environmental injustices compound to impact communities of color. Large quantities of solid and hazardous waste from Hurricane Katrina were deposited at sites in communities predominantly inhabited by people of color (Kubendran, 2011). To make matters worse, these same communities became repositories for waste materials from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and cleanup (Kubendran, 2011). The distribution of hazardous waste into these communities was outlined in the British Petroleum's waste management plan that was approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. states involved, the U.S. Coast Guard, and Unified Area Command (Kubendran, 2011).

Environmental justice and promotion of health equity is a responsibility that falls squarely on the shoulders of environmental health professionals. Environmental health professionals' day-to-day operations play an important role in combating environmental injustice and inequality. For example, the quality of education and inspection an environmental health professional gives to a restaurant operator in a neighborhood of color can determine the quality of food safety within that community. In addition, cultural competence is essential when inspecting ethnic restaurants.

The *2012 Environmental Justice Strategy and Implementation Plan* proposes a variety of approaches to reduce environmental injustice and should be utilized by all environmental health professionals (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Environmental health professionals have the basic duty of educating, supporting, and maintaining the environmental health of a community and eliminating racial environmental injustice.

Health in All Policies

HiAP strives to improve the health of all members of a community through the deliberation of collective decision-making of various community sectors and policy development (Rudolph, Caplan, Mitchell, Ben-Moshe, & Dillon, 2013). This process is achieved through educating policy makers on areas of health, equity, and sustainability in order to create the most informed and inclusive health promotion policies. Determinants of health that influence HiAP approaches are economic status, highest level of education attained, systemic racism, and neighborhood characteristics and inequities (Rudolph et al., 2013). Often, policy decisions that can influence a community's health outcomes are overseen by nonhealth professionals in housing development, transportation, education, and criminal justice, among others. The HiAP framework allows environmental health to be an integral part of policy development. Without HiAP, policy makers might make impactful decisions based on implicit racial biases rather than scientifically supported data, which can negatively affect communities of color and result in decades of systemic health inequity.

The value of environmental health in a community requires investment in that community's culture and expansion of health education. Access to better pharmaceuticals can reduce environmental illnesses such as asthma in communities of color but interventions such as pollution reduction, better air quality, and safer and cleaner housing free of mold and pest are more cost effective and easier to replicate in scale (Wernham & Teutsch, 2015). Many big cities have begun to integrate HiAP into their environmental health policies. For example, Seattle/King County has changed their natural resources and parks budget to provide safer areas for physical activity in low-income neighborhoods (Wernham & Teutsch, 2015). In 2013, the mayor of Washington, DC, issued an executive order on employing HiAP in

the city's sustainability plan. This plan consisted of several provisions to improve the health of the city's low-income residents by creating more parks and green space, reducing food deserts, and increase access to safer and healthier housing neighborhoods (Wernham & Teutsch, 2015). In order to secure healthy outcomes for all residents, environmental health professionals must ensure equitable public and environmental health investments in communities of color.

Training on Diversity

Addressing racism and bias in the workplaces goes beyond recruitment and hiring practices. Most companies implement diversity training as a way to raise awareness and foster an inclusive atmosphere in the workplace (Chavez & Weisinger, 2008) There is mixed evidence when looking at the effectiveness of diversity training but more studies demonstrate that incorporating diversity training into the organizational culture does have positive impacts, including improving attitudes and behaviors, though these effects may be short-lived.

There are, however, benefits to incorporating diversity training and programs that go beyond single training events and organizations should not see one-off diversity trainings as a sole remedy for combatting biases and prejudices (Kalev, Dobbin, & Kelly, 2006). A meta-analysis of 260 studies of the effects of diversity training overall indicates positive outcomes on the effects on cognitive learning. The positive effects were greater when trainings were complimented by other diversity initiatives that targeted awareness of biases and skill development and occurred over a longer period of time (Bezrukova, Spell, Perry, & Jehn, 2016). When incorporating diversity trainings at the organization level, there must be a broader strategy in place to reinforce learnings and continued awareness and education.

There are many types of diversity trainings and resources that exist and it is important to ensure that organizations implement the trainings in a manner that will yield positive outcomes within the workforce. The most effective diversity programs are those that establish organizational responsibility and incorporate an accompanying organization-wide strategy that is culturally inclusive and includes regular education elements (Kalev et al., 2006). Additionally, an all-inclusive multiculturalism approach is useful for positive and effective organizational changes and enhances employee engagement where traditional diversity approaches such as color blindness and multiculturalism have failed (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). By implementing these strategies for diversity programs in the workplace, organizations can continue to address biases and racism that contribute to health inequities.

Diversifying Hiring Practices

According to NEHA President Dr. Priscilla Oliver, "Diversity has increasingly become an important part of organizational operations and health" (Oliver, 2020). Employment opportunities play a vital role in economic stability; however, racial discrimination in hiring practices lead to major disparities in employment and wages. Recent studies have highlighted bias against minorities in the résumé screening process when résumés that had been scrubbed of references to racial identity, known as "résumé whitening," received twice as many calls for interviews compared with résumés from candidates who revealed their race (Kang, DeCelles, Tilcsik, & Jun, 2016). Similarly, there is evidence that White-sounding names receive 50% more callbacks for interviews than Black-sounding names (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). Additionally, in New York City, when White, Black, and Latino job applicants used equivalent résumés to apply for hundreds of entry-level jobs, Black candidates were half as likely as White counterparts to receive a callback for an interview (Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009). While discrimination based on race is illegal per the Civil Rights Act of 1964, individual biases and attitudes contribute to continued systemic racism present in hiring practices.

In order to combat these practices of racial discrimination and bias in the workplace, best practices to promote diversity should include the implementation of policies and procedures at various stages of recruitment, hiring, and employment (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). These include diversifying recruitment strategies to expand the pool of eligible candidates, conducting ongoing analysis of current employment practices, creating objective qualification standards, and ensuring these strategies are applied consistently when evaluating candidates. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission also recommends providing retention strategies such as training and mentoring to workers of all backgrounds to ensure that all employees have the same access to opportunities, skills, and experiences. These efforts will help recruit and retain a diverse leadership and workforce that more closely resembles the populations served.

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