Zika virus, Legionnaires’ disease, and the Flint, Michigan, water crisis are examples of diseases and events requiring a response from a prepared, sufficient, and equipped environmental health workforce. While demands continue to increase, diverse factors such as health department budget cuts and decreased capacity can negatively impact environmental health professionals and programs (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2014; National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2013). These compounding factors reinforce the need to understand the environmental health workforce to identify gaps in staffing, training, and ultimately, to ensure preparedness to meet future challenges. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services, developed with input from numerous environmental health stakeholders representing governmental, nongovernmental, and academic organizations, identified the significance of conducting in-depth evaluations to ensure the existence of a sufficient and well-trained environmental health workforce with the capacity to provide quality services addressing community need (CDC, 2003).

Previous studies describing state, tribal, local, and territorial health departments have addressed aspects of environmental health staffing and services, yet there remains a critical need to engage environmental health professionals with a method designed specifically for the environmental health profession. In response, CDC, the National Environmental Health Association, and Baylor University are partnering on an innovative initiative to characterize the environmental health profession and understand the challenges environmental health professionals encounter. This effort, Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH), presents an unprecedented opportunity to delve into the profession and understand environmental health professional demographics, education and training, experience, areas of practice, and the current and future needs of environmental health professionals.

Though the work of environmental health professionals and the services they deliver are critical to protect local communities, the profession often remains unknown to many until an event occurs and appears on the front page of the newspaper or the nightly news. An initiative like UNCOVER EH has the potential to increase awareness of the profession by obtaining information directly from environmental health professionals about their practice and the challenges they currently face and envision for the future. UNCOVER EH con-
“Workforce evaluations are needed to ascertain the current level of competence, methods of training, effect of training, effect of the ‘essential services’ approach to environmental public health, relations between competencies and practices as they pertain to community-based needs, information that reaches the environmental public health workforce, and effect of workforce-directed activities on the level of competence and job performance.” (p.19)

— A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/publications/strategy.htm)

References


