

Uncovering Environmental Health Needs and Opportunities

Editor's Note: NEHA strives to provide up-to-date and relevant information on environmental health and to build partnerships in the profession. In pursuit of these goals, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) features this column on environmental health services from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the Journal.

In these columns, authors from CDC's Water, Food, and Environmental Health Services Branch, as well as guest authors, will share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in these columns are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position of CDC.

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Health departments represent the frontline of public health but how much do we really know about the professionals working there? Profiles of state and local health departments provide helpful information about health department services and programs. In fact, these profiles document that environmental health is one of the largest segments of the public health workforce (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2017; National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2017). Detailed information about the environmental health profession, however, is beyond the scope of those assessments.

To better understand environmental health professionals and the programs they lead, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Environmental Health, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA), and Baylor University partnered to conduct a first of its kind assessment of this critical group within governmental health departments. The initiative became known as Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH).

Contacting environmental health professionals across the nation turned out to be no

small undertaking. Overall, the national results included responses from 1,700 environmental health professionals from governmental public health programs at state, tribal, local, and territorial levels.

What Did They Find?

The initial UNCOVER EH article (Gerding et al., 2019) focused on demographic and programmatic information. Key takeaways included the following:

Food safety is the most common program area environmental health professionals work in and many work in more than one program area.

While balanced between men and women, the environmental health workforce has opportunities to become more racially and ethnically diverse.

The environmental health workforce is aging and presents recruitment needs (Figure 1).

The environmental health workforce is well educated but degrees are not always in environmental health.

Most respondents hold the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential.

Further analysis reported by NEHA yielded insight into salaries and credentialing (National Environmental Health Association, 2019a, 2019b). Subsequent articles summarized themes from focus group discussions with environmental health professionals about challenges they face. Environmental health staff reported challenges in six key areas: drinking water quality, wastewater management, healthy homes, food safety, vectors and public health pests, and emerging issues (Brooks et al., 2019). Challenges

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