

▶ DIRECT FROM AAS

CDR Jessica
OttoCAPT Jill
ShugartCDR Jennifer
Dobson

The Path of the Environmental Health Professional: If You Can Dream It, We Can Build It!

Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based on meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal's* readership. The conclusions and opinions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

CDR Jessica Otto is a retail food specialist at the Food and Drug Administration. She became a diplomate of AAS in 2020. CAPT Jill Shugart is the associate director for emergency management for the National Center for Environmental Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She became a diplomate of AAS in 2019. CDR Jennifer Dobson is a senior epidemiologist with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. She became a diplomate of AAS in 2019. All three authors serve on the AAS Board of Directors.

Greetings from three new board members of the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS). Despite our different career paths and stories, we share a strong desire to help grow the environmental health profession. While none of us are currently stationed in Kansas, we would like to apply the yellow brick road metaphor to our quest for excellence within the environmental health profession. Likewise, we want to

help YOU be the best environmental health professional you can be and to have the best tools, resources, and support along the way.

Are you ready? No magic wand is required! Although it is too bad magic wands do not work on bacteria, viruses, or chemical spills!

The profession of environmental health has always been diverse as a practice, so it is no surprise that over the past few decades, the community of professionals has also diversi-

fied. In recent years, key demographics such as gender and race have become more diverse among environmental health practitioners (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). There are also shifting efforts to support inclusion and equity in the services we provide to not only our communities but also our members. Many programs are incorporating the Seven Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being into environmental health responses as a way to consider one's environmental health practice and mindset (Community Commons, n.d.).

Since its inception in 1966, AAS (also called the Academy) has remained committed to promoting and enhancing the profession through certification, education, mentoring, and recognition of achievements. The Academy has had a wide and varied membership throughout its long and storied history, with the common purpose of defining and promoting the professional status of an environmental health professional, recommending that laws be developed and promulgated requiring registration, and developing and promoting education and additional qualifications. In short, it is an organization that guides the practice and ensures proficiency! If you are not yet familiar with the Academy, it represents a prestigious collection of professionals from across the country who represent numerous disciplines. Many past NEHA presidents, for example, are Academy members (Zemel, 2015).

If you ask Academy members what accomplishments they are most proud of, there is a good chance you will see proud smiles and knowing glances as they share stories about their support of students and early career professionals. The Academy includes many of the leaders and thinkers within the envi-

ronmental health profession, and they are wholeheartedly dedicated to growing the next generation of environmental health leaders! Here are a few such spotlights:

- The Academy cosponsors and contributes to the NEHA/AAS Scholarships to support eligible undergraduate and graduate students in their academic studies and to encourage early commitment by students to pursue a career in environmental health.
- Thanks to the expansive disciplines represented by our membership body, the Academy offers formal and informal mentoring to showcase the numerous environmental health paths available.
- The Academy offers an impressive array of career and professional development opportunities, from peer networking to leadership opportunities.
- A diversity, equity, and inclusion committee was created by the Academy to ensure our organization continues to evolve and meet the needs of our environmental health practitioners. Since 2022, the Academy's board has welcomed a more diverse group of decision makers. The Academy is dedicated to encouraging and supporting a membership body that truly reflects the needs of the profession.

With these core values in mind, the Academy is at a crossroads with several modernization efforts underway. It is important as we undertake these efforts that we not only meet the needs of today's professionals but also plan for the future. Learning from the Tin Man, we know that meeting the needs of the profession requires compassion, empathy, and leading with heart.

If you are wondering how the Academy can serve you, here is a bit about the membership process. Membership is comprised of two types of certifications: diplomate and diplomate laureate. These distinctions are awarded to professionals in the field of environmental health who have completed specialized training, are considered experts, or have been designated by having special skills in their field. The requirements to be a diplomate include

holding bachelor's and master's degrees in environmental health or a related field, being a Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS), having at least 7 years of field experience, and having authored at least one paper on an environmental health topic (American Academy of Sanitarians, n.d.). Why wouldn't you want to take your career to the next level and be designated as a diplomate?

Obtaining these standards sets the bar for environmental health professionals and establishes their competence in the field, which in turn allows them to serve as mentors to others starting out in the field and to provide a different perspective to those professionals who have been practicing for years. Having field experience also ensures technical competence in at least one given area in the field. This experience is critical for learning how to practice book knowledge and adds to the body of wisdom that can advance science and allows for contributions in the form of technical assistance and reviews from peers. Environmental health professionals have never been stretched so thin in terms of workforce numbers and expectations.

Wouldn't it be refreshing to have a diverse organization provide mentoring and offer special knowledge on an array of environmental health topics to our fellow diplomates to help solve complex problems? It could be the lifeline if you will that so many of us desperately need as we try to do less with more due to the fact that the very definition of environmental health seems to keep expanding every time a "new" issue pops up.

Will you join us as we cultivate the strategic future of the Academy one brick at a time? Here is what you can do:

- Connect with the Academy! We want to hear from you. If you will be attending the NEHA 2024 Annual Educational Conference & Exhibition, join us for a special session to discuss and frame our next steps. Stay tuned for more details. While attending, be on the lookout for attendees wearing AAS ribbons on name tags. The Acad-

emy members would love to meet you and discuss opportunities!

- Share your thoughts remotely by emailing CDR Otto at J.Otto.AAS@gmail.com.
 - » Tell us why you became an environmental health professional? What does it mean to you?
 - » What areas should the Academy focus on? Examples include specific technical areas or topics, mentoring, scholarships, or something else.
 - » What organizations should the Academy partner with?
 - » For Academy members, why did you join?
 - » If you are not a member, why not?

Acknowledgements: Thank you to Vince Radke, Michèle Samarya-Timm, Eric Bradley, James J. Balsamo, Jr., and Wendy Fanaselle for their contributions to this column.

Corresponding Author: CDR Jessica Otto, Board of Directors, American Academy of Sanitarians. Email: J.Otto.AAS@gmail.com.



References

- American Academy of Sanitarians. (n.d.). *Membership application*. <https://sanitarians.org/Membership-Application>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). *UNCOVEREH infographic on key findings*. <https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/uncovereh/infographic-key-findings.html>
- Community Commons. (n.d.). *Seven vital conditions for health and well-being*. <https://www.communitycommons.org/collections/Seven-Vital-Conditions-for-Health-and-Well-Being>
- Zemel, F.I. (2015). What is a diplomate, and what does it do? *Journal of Environmental Health*, 78(1), 34–35.

Did You Know?

Check out our new online store of NEHA-branded items at <https://neha.checkoutstores.com>. Show off your pride in your association and support students as a portion of the sales will go to the NEHA/AAS Scholarship Fund.