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Healthy People 2030 and Environmental Health



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Editor's Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, 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 upon 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. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

The Healthy People initiative provides science-based national goals and objectives with 10-year targets designed to guide national health promotion and disease prevention efforts to improve the health of all people in the U.S. The most recent version, Healthy People 2020, identifies environmental health objectives that focus on six themes: outdoor air quality, surface and groundwater quality, toxic substances and hazardous wastes, homes and communities, infrastructure and surveillance, and global

environmental health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

In planning national priorities for the decade to come, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) solicited comments on the proposed framework for Healthy People 2030, including the plan of action and overarching goals. In response to this open solicitation, the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) recently submitted the following comments focused on the education and training of the environmental health workforce.

Environmental health professionals are the bedrock foundation of public health. Since the development of the actual practice of environmental health during the 19th and 20th centuries, it has become evident that government has a responsibility to protect the environment that humans depend upon for their survival and well-being, including food and water safety, air quality, control and proper disposal of waste products, safe and healthy housing, etc.

Despite the essential role of environmental health professionals in helping to protect the public, environmental health is not always well represented in public discourse. In media coverage, for instance, stories rarely use the terms environmental health or environmental public health, even when discussing issues that fall within the field's boundaries. In addition, environmental health practitioners are rarely represented to the public's eye and are notably absent from media coverage on areas where they are subject matter experts (O'Neil, Simon, Haydon, & Kendall-Taylor, 2012).

It is not a far reach to presume that the lack of widespread professional visibility has led to a decreased perception in the importance of the environmental health workforce. For years, state and local public health agencies have reported substantial workforce losses and other challenges to the environmental health workforce. At the turn of the 21st century, an estimated 250,000 environmental

health professionals were working in the U.S. According to the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), more than 50,600 state and local environmental health workforce jobs have been lost since 2008 (NACCHO, 2013). This number represents approximately 22% of the total state and local environmental health workforce.

“Credentialed environmental health practitioners, where they exist, have strong science degrees, routinely partner with the regulated community, and understand cultural sensitivities because they live in the communities in which they serve. These valuable workforce characteristics help ensure a healthy and prosperous society,” said David Dyjack, executive director and CEO of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2017). Many states, however, have never adopted credentialing requirements or are sunseting these requirements, even though the nature of the field is greatly expanding to deal with natural and man-caused disasters, new potential health threats from climate change, new materials and processes, demographic shifts, and increased travel and trade resulting in the transport of infectious agents around the globe, just to name a few.

According to William Barnes, NACCHO acting executive director and chief program officer, protecting the safety of the water we drink, the food we eat, and the air we breathe requires that local health departments have a strong, capable environmental health workforce. Nationally, we need to provide support for these hard-working professionals that serve people in our communities every day (NEHA, 2017).

Environmental health professionals at federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial levels are on the front lines in preventing illness. They ensure the safety of food service establishments, investigate environmental causes of foodborne and waterborne outbreaks, and respond to outbreaks and other disasters. Environmental health programs across the country are very diverse, but are often the home for the permitting and inspection for drinking water and wastewater, restaurants, swimming pools, and other facilities. In addition to food and water, the environmental health service system is also

engaged in sustainable development, vector control, air quality, and injury prevention. The military services also have environmental health professionals who address issues similar to their civilian counterparts, as well as specialize in and respond to issues that are unique to military activities, operations, and deployments. Military service environmental health professionals and environmental health officers from the U.S. Public Health Service are often mobilized to support domestic and international humanitarian and disaster relief efforts.

A strong, sustained, and prepared environmental health workforce is needed to meet today's challenges and to improve the health and safety of all. Our country's ability to provide safe food and water rests on seamlessly integrating information and expertise related to the host, agent, and environmental aspects of disease and outbreaks. Environmental health programs represent a key segment of the multidisciplinary approach required to ensure safe food and water in the U.S.

Environmental health professionals play a crucial role in decreasing illnesses in our communities and protecting people from traditional and emerging environmental factors that might adversely affect human health. As a result, the workforce challenges facing this critical component of the public health system are a concern for public and community health.

Given the diversity and complexity of recent environmental health issues that have been a high priority for public safety (e.g., lead contaminated drinking water, food tainted with *E. coli*, and potential outbreaks of Zika virus), it is essential to ensure that the U.S. has a highly skilled workforce to find the best solutions and protect future generations. Therefore, AAS strongly recommends that the education and training of existing and new environmental health professionals be a national public health goal.

HHS will review and use comments received to develop the final version of the Healthy People 2030 framework. It is anticipated that HHS will provide an opportunity for further public comment on the proposed objectives that were informed through input such as the comments provided by AAS. Following this process is important to environmental health advocacy and all environmental health professionals are essential players in the dialogue. We each have a role

within our spheres of influence to help assure enhanced local, national, and global understanding, inclusion, and support of environmental health and the environmental health profession. As we take environmental health into the next decade and beyond, we can amplify the messages of who we are and what we do to achieve the vision of healthy people in healthy environments.

Information on Healthy People 2030, its development process, and comment opportunities can be found at www.HealthyPeople.gov.



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