



Increasing the Retention of Environmental Health Specialists in Los Angeles County

Thomas E. West

Los Angeles County, Department of Public Health, Environmental Health, Baldwin Park, California 91706



Executive Summary

Los Angeles County is the largest local environmental public health agency in the State of California and in most cases larger than most states in the United States. It is becoming more difficult to retain inspectors who are experienced and trained as they seek other employment with higher compensations or better opportunities with another public health agency. Because salary increases are beyond the control of the environmental health leadership, alternative methods are needed to dissuade staff from leaving Environmental Health. Replacement of older staff members who are approaching retirement and holding key positions requires succession planning to maintain the intellectual knowledge.

This report tries to determine the explanations for staff departures by reviewing individual exit interview questionnaires that categorized the reasons for departures and by analyzing data from the Environmental Health Management Information System for staffing trends. In addition, the report will explore the opportunities available in Los Angeles County to attract experienced environmental health specialists and to retain existing staff.

Introduction/Background

Los Angeles County Environmental Health is responsible for 40,000 fixed food facilities, 6,000 mobile food vehicles, 70,400 housing complexes with 5 units or more, 16,000 public swimming pools, 1,300 solid waste sites, 200 small water systems, 440 animal keepers, 2,000 plan reviews for private septic systems/pools/food facilities, and responding to approximately 20,000 general citizen requests, in a quiet year. Since 1995, the annual turnover rate for Los Angeles County Environmental Health Specialists has increased, placing an added burden on remaining staff to meet the goal of 400,000 site inspections per year.

Some of the vacancy rate can be traced to budget issues in the mid 1990's when Environmental Health developed a large surplus of revenue as a result of increased permit inventories, and imposed hiring freezes. The number of retail food facilities grew rapidly, increasing revenue while the number of filled positions decreased to meet the department's budget shortfalls. This created lower salary expenditures and eventually an 11 million dollar surplus. A lawsuit was brought on by the employee union, resulting in the creation of a trust fund where all revenue was placed before being withdrawn to pay for salary and operating expenditures. In order to expand this surplus, the County decided to use the surplus to pay for staffing augmentations in the food program to manage the inventory increases and to forgo future fee adjustments over several years until the surplus had been exhausted.

Abstaining from fee increases during this period failed to account for increased staffing and salary expenditures. Once the surplus was depleted, subsequent fee adjustments to maintain staffing were never sufficient to balance the budget. It appears that senior management was not willing to request such a fee increase from the Board of Supervisors. The lower fee increases that were approved resulted in a deficit budget, requiring positions to remain vacant while money was saved through salary savings. The effect of these vacancies over the next several years reduced promotional opportunities and lateral transfer to other desired disciplines in Environmental Health.

Problem Statement

The County of Los Angeles is losing more employees through the attrition of individuals seeking higher salaries, different career paths, and retirement than that gained from the recruiting and retention of qualified inspectors. Salaries and the cost of living in Los Angeles may not be the number one cause of why people leave, but it is one that is heard frequently. The Loma Linda study on California "attributed the faltering stability of their workforce to several reasons, most notable low salaries and high housing costs." The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC's) National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services identifies the problem as "pay scales in the public sector often are low, and as public health departments take on more environmental issues, rapid turnover of staff frequently occurs." Retaining and recruiting environmental public health staff is national issue, not just a local problem.

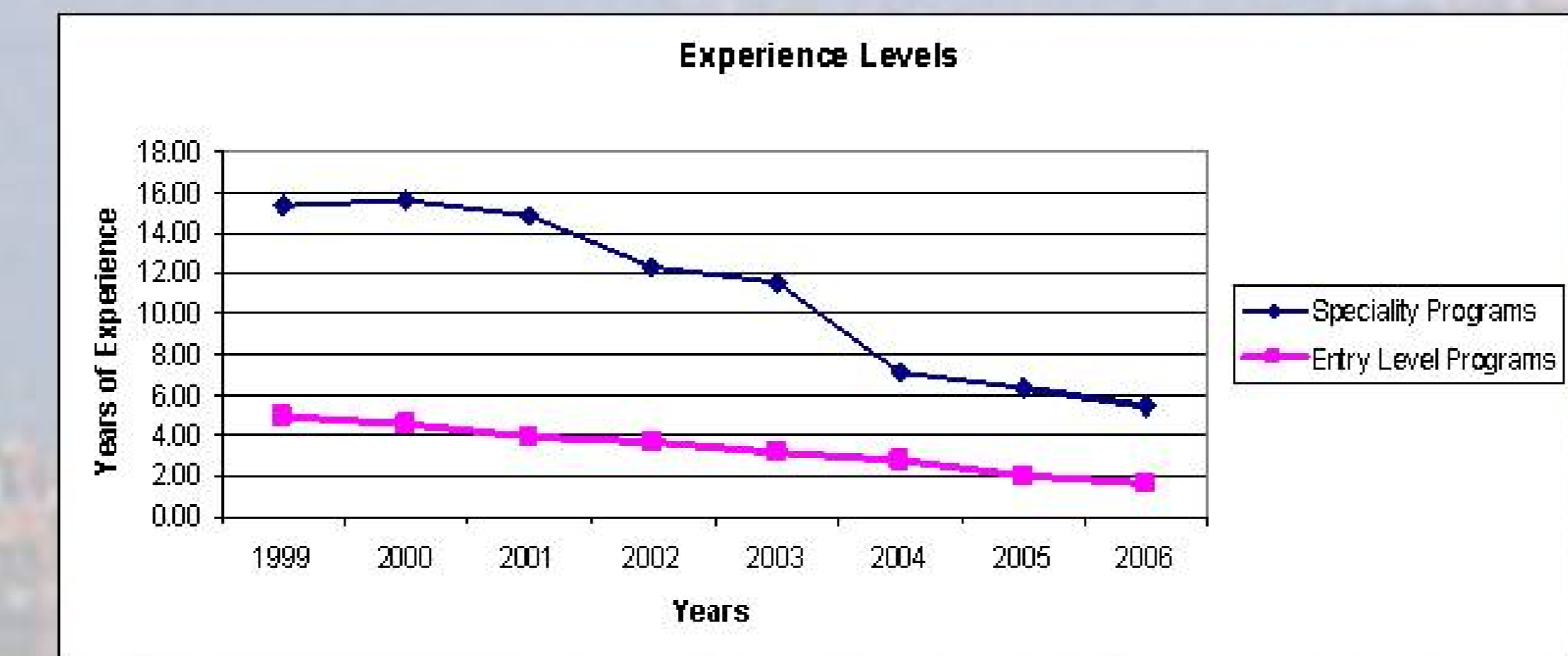
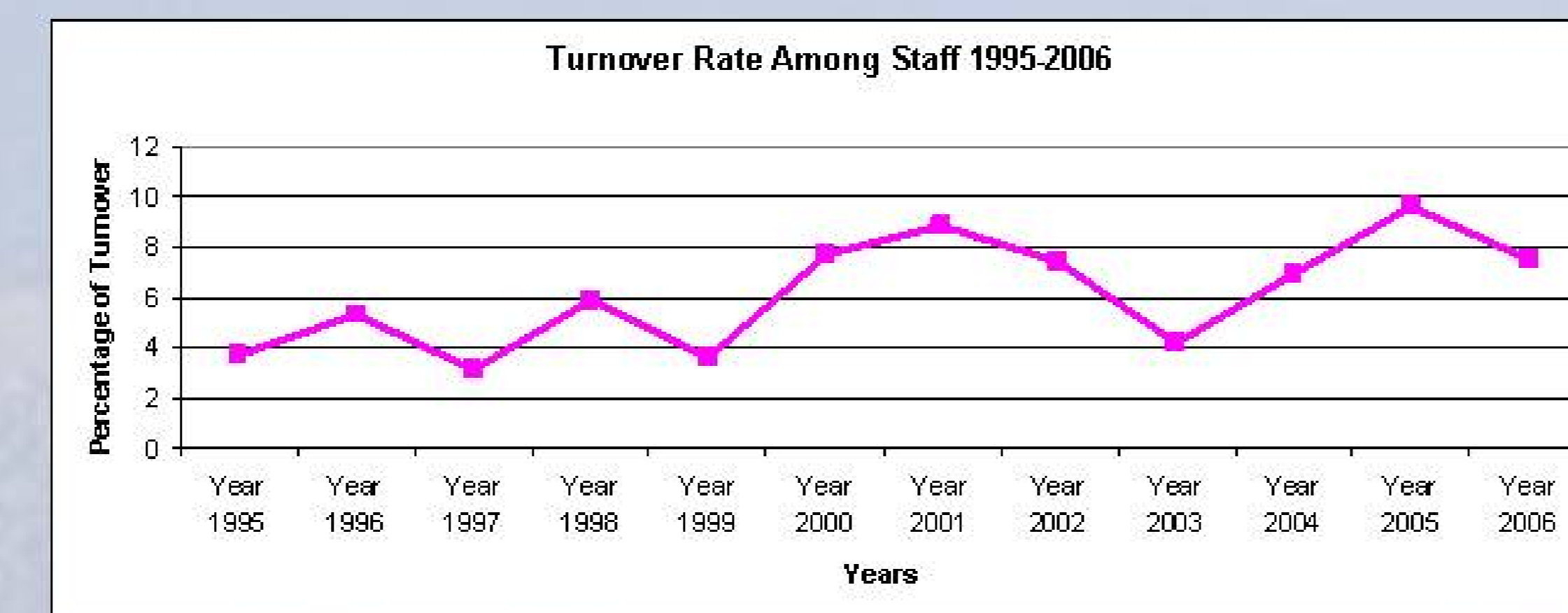
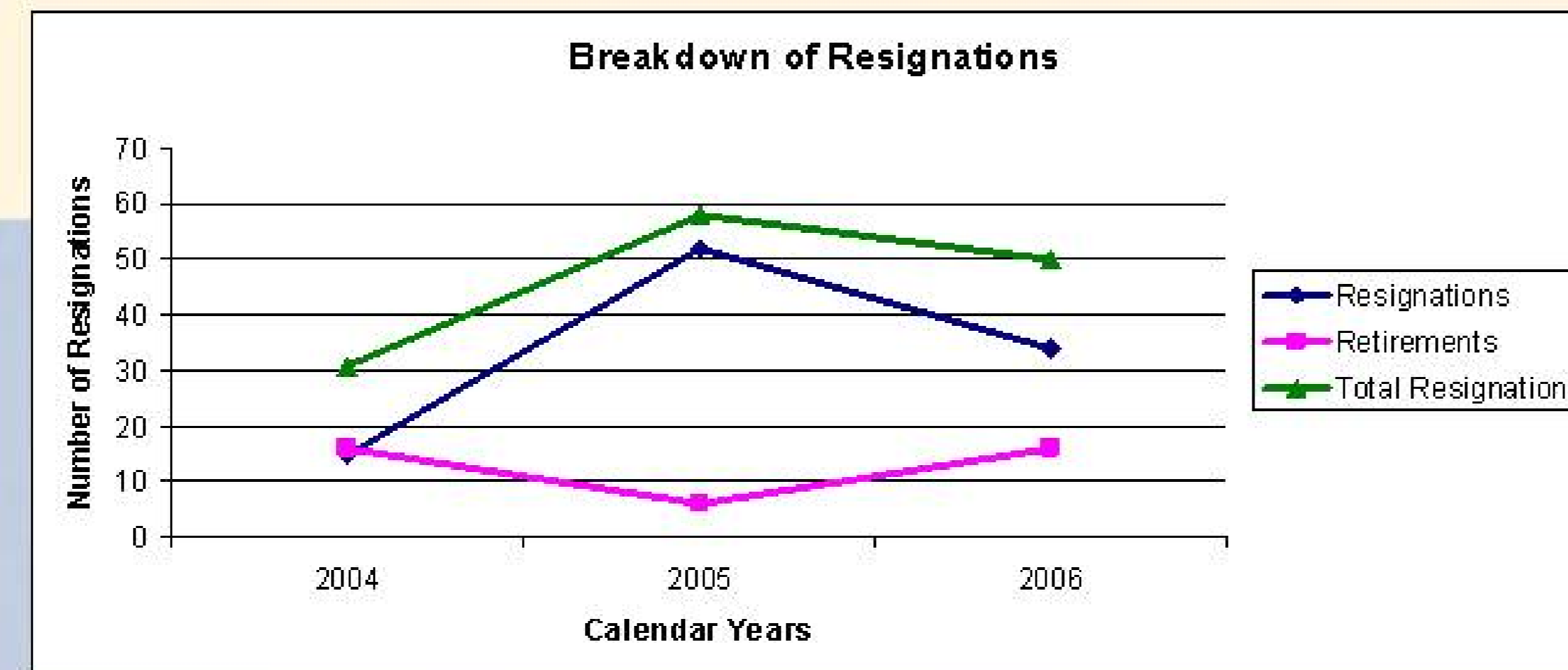
In Los Angeles County, some individuals look outside the department for careers or professions that more closely fit their particular talents. Others, whose career paths are not being fulfilled because their opportunity to work in other programs is being blocked, find fulfillment in neighboring counties.

Retirement is something that local agencies need to be planning for as employees get older and turn to new careers. Most of these workers have spent their entire careers in Environmental Health collecting useful knowledge, which needs to be shared with younger staff members. Some of these individuals have also become leaders and need to develop their successor's capacity to perform public health activities.

Staffing Trends

Environmental Health Management Information System

In reviewing data from the Environmental Health Management Information System (EHMIS) database, there is a noticeable upward trend in the turnover rate that has doubled since 1995. The turnover rate was high during 2000, 2001, 2002, then dropped in 2003 before increasing in 2004 and again in 2005 to a peak high of 9.66 percent. When comparing the experience levels between specialty units, such as recreational health and solid waste programs, and the entry-level units that perform the retail food or rental housing inspections, the levels are higher in the specialty units, as is expected. More importantly, the experience level in both categories is declining. This can be attributed to the higher turnover rate and the beginning retirement of the baby boomer generation.



Current Staff and Resigned Staff
The average age of staff resigning in the last six years is 42 years old. The average length of employment of this staff is eight years. In comparison to current staff and staff that have resigned, there seems to be no real difference. This is misleading since all of the senior management personnel are not counted in the EHMIS database nor are their ages, length of stay, and average salary, which one would expect to be much higher.

COMPARISON BETWEEN CURRENT STAFF AND RESIGNED STAFF
Los Angeles County Environmental Health, 2000-2006

	Current (N=627)	Resigned (N=369)
Average Age	44	42
Average Length within EH	11 yrs	8 yrs
Average Salary	\$4,471.36	\$4,317.67
Last Promotion	7.8 yrs	6.2 yrs
Average Number of Transfers	5	4

Exit Interview Questionnaires

An exit interview is held by Staff Development staff when employees return County property at administrative headquarters. The purpose is to gather reasons and try to address those issues causing them to resign.

One hundred and forty-one individuals have left Los Angeles in the last three years. In reviewing the exit interview questionnaires of staff that have resigned, most left for higher salaries in other counties, state, federal governmental positions, and private industry. It also reveals that some staff left for greater opportunities in other environmental health programs, that are not available in Los Angeles. Retirements only represent 28% of all individuals who leave to pursue other career options.

Demographics

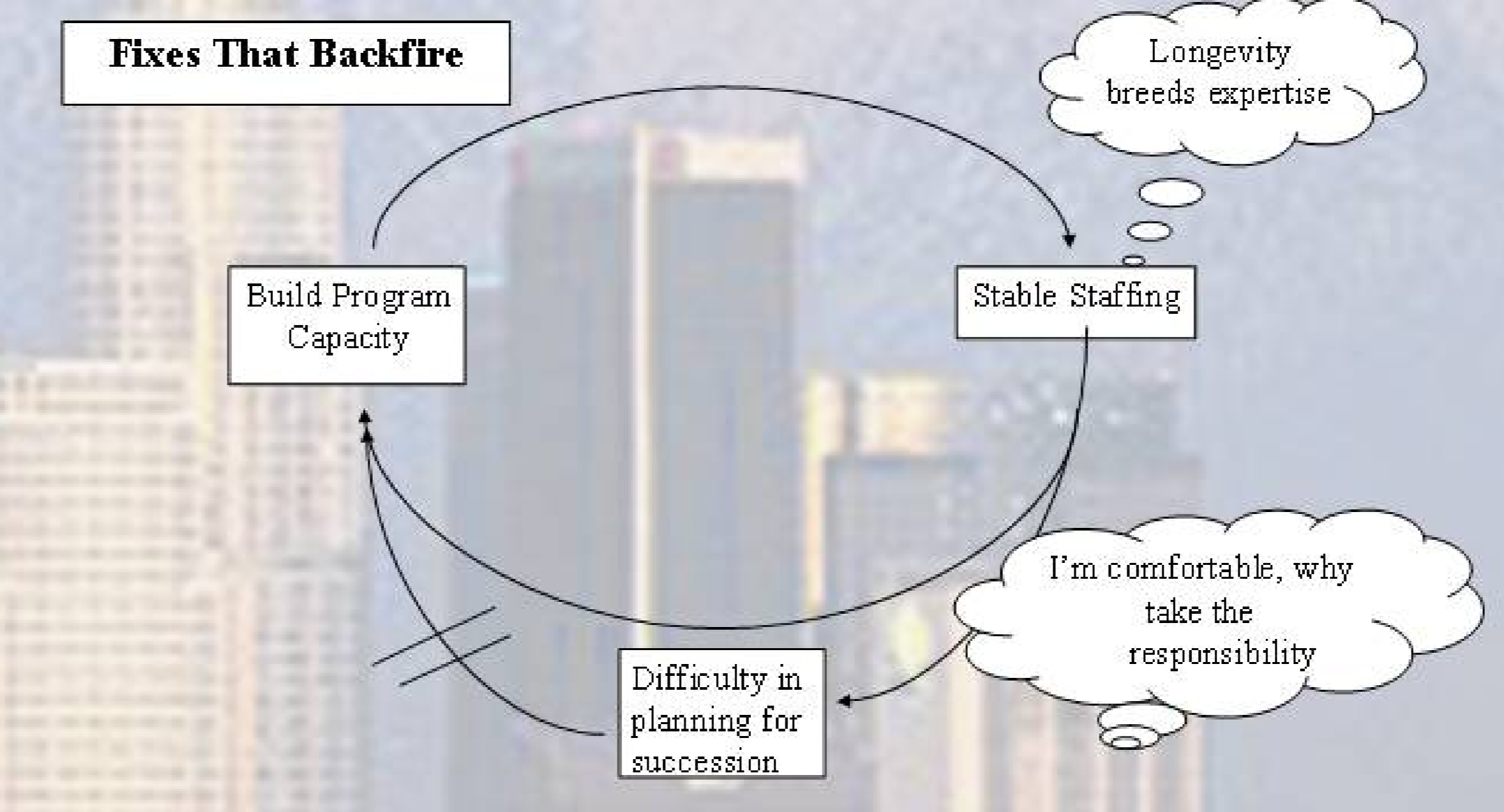
The demographics between Los Angeles County Environmental Health Specialists and the rest of the State of California were also compared. Both the California and Los Angeles County are similar in percentage of male to female, 55% males and 45% females in the state, to 56% males and 44% females in the County. With regard to ethnicity of inspectors, there are 61% white inspectors in California, but only 32% in Los Angeles County. There are more Black inspectors in Los Angeles County than the State, while the percentage of Hispanic inspectors is the same in the State and County. Other ethnicity and age differences between California and Los Angeles are also listed in the following table.

Category	State of California	Los Angeles County
Gender		
Males	55%	56%
Females	45%	44%
Ethnic Origin		
White	61%	32%
Black	9%	18%
Hispanic	16%	16%
Asian Pacific Islander	11%	23%
Other/Filipino	3%	8%
Age		
18-24	2%	2%
25-44	52%	54%
45-64	45%	43%
65+	1%	<1%

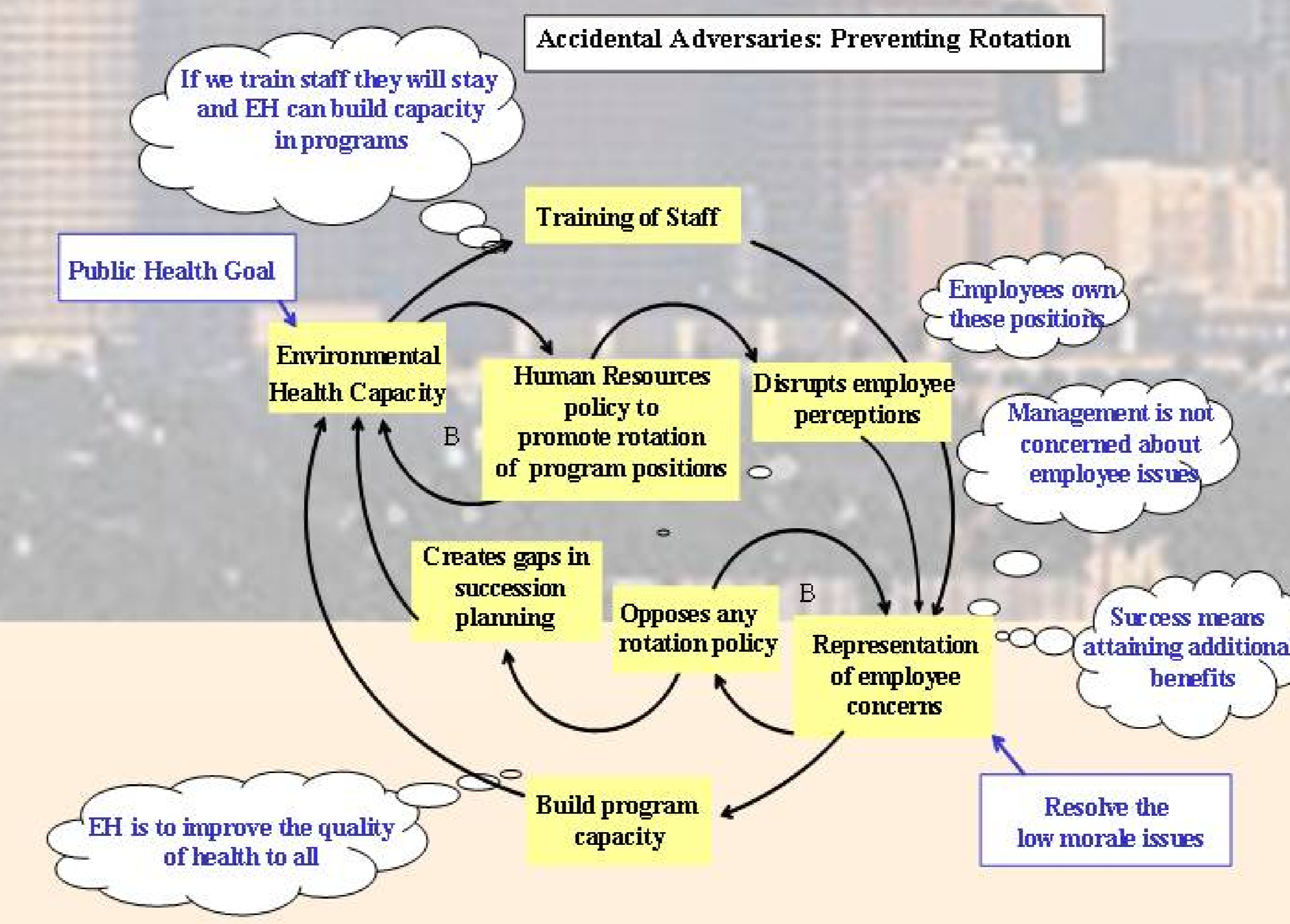
Note: Information in the above table comes from the Loma Linda University School of Public Health study *California's County and City Environmental Services Delivery System* by Paola Case and David Dyjack, and the Los Angeles County, Environmental Health Management Information System.

Causal Loop Diagrams and Applicable Archetypes

The following causal loop diagrams and archetypes explain the obstacles with Los Angeles County efforts to retain staff. Fixes That Backfire loop explains that while having staff remain in a program for a long time, this fixes the immediate goal of program stability, over the long term it backfires as it does not build workforce capacity and reduces the motivation for succession planning.



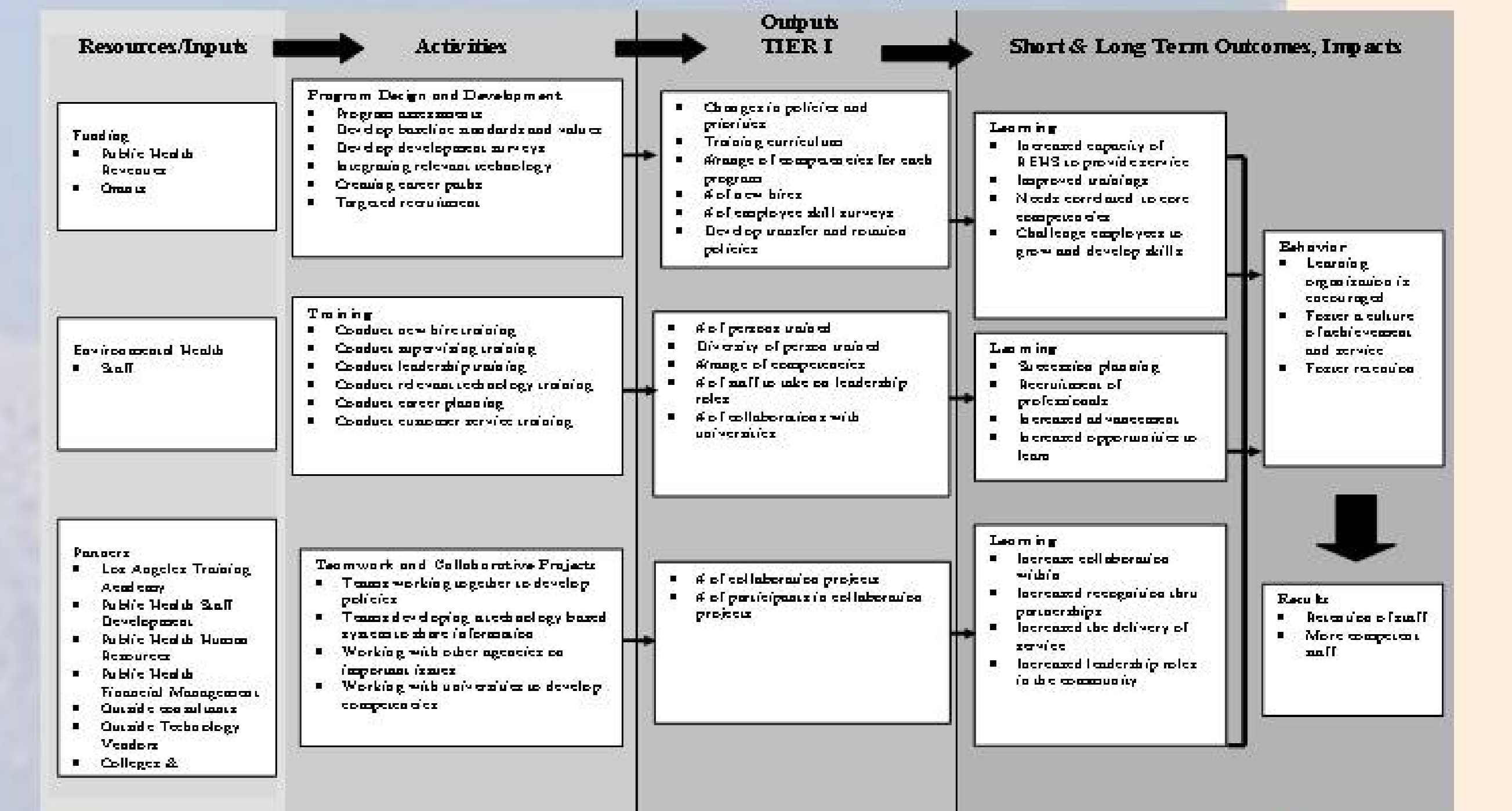
The *Fifth Discipline Field* book describes accidental adversary's archetype by "how two groups of people who ought to be in partnership with each other, and who want to be in partnership with each other, end up bitterly opposed." This is a classic union and management situation in which the leaders of the organization seize on an opportunity to fix a problem and clash with the union. This affects some members negatively. The County sees the opportunity to build competency within the organization by rotating staff to challenging positions. The union reacts negatively to the proposal, resulting in no collaboration.



National Goals Supported

One of the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention Health Protection goals is to "increase the number of communities that protect, and promote health and safety and prevent illness and injury in all their members." This project does this by increasing the capacity in Los Angeles County to confront emerging threats with a capable workforce that is highly trained with a diverse understanding of environmental health. Employees need to be well prepared in case they are called to become first responders in identifying and assessing a public health issue. This project is also in agreement with CDC's efforts to revitalize the Nation's environmental delivery service by developing the workforce and building program capacity to meet existing and new public health threats. Even the American Public Health Association recognizes the need to have a well-qualified workforce with standardized competencies.

Project Logic Model: Goal: Improve the retention rate and competency of Environmental Health Specialists in Los Angeles County



PROJECT OBJECTIVES/DESCRIPTION/DELIVERABLES

Program Goal: To increase retention in Los Angeles County of environmental health specialist staff and build program capacity in a learning organization.

Health Problem: The lack of a trained and experienced workforce of environmental health specialist is threatening the community capacity to respond to public health issues.

Outcome Objective: To change program and employee perspective in developing a diverse career path towards increasing competency and capacity in environmental health.

Determinant: The number of vacancies and the difficulty in recruiting new employees.

Impact Objective: Decrease in the number of vacancies and increase the higher level of competency in staff to respond to public health issues.

Contributing Factors:

- The high cost of living in Los Angeles.
- Salary compensation levels.
- Promotional opportunities.
- Diversity of programs.
- The variety of work schedules available.

Process Objectives: Establish specific career paths for those staff who wish to make Los Angeles County Environmental Health Division their career choice by offering a diverse and meaningful exposure to programs within the division.

METHODOLOGY

Events and Activities

In July 2006, met with the Environmental Health Leadership Team (EHLT) to discuss retention and recruitment issues. On December 12, 2006, met with the EHLT and the County Administrative Officer (CAO), Compensation Unit to discuss retention and recruitment activities. On January 18, 2007, met with the Teamsters Union 911 bargaining representatives and the CAO to discuss retention and recruitment issues.

NEXT STEPS

- Have further meetings to build a collaborative effort between EHLT and the union to develop career paths for those who want to make Environmental Health their career.
- Educate program directors and supervisors on the benefits of having a diverse and experienced staff who can handle multiple environmental health issues.
- Inform employees of the benefits of having a diverse background and prospects of future promotional opportunities.
- Make this a volunteer program in having a career in Los Angeles County.

References

- Los Angeles County, Department of Public Health, Environmental Health Management Information System Database.
- Case P, Dyjack D. January 6, 2006 *California's County and City Environmental Health Services Delivery System*. Loma Linda University School of Public Health, Office of Public Practices & Workforce Development.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention - National Center for Environmental Health (2003) *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services*.
- Senge P, Kleiner A, Roberts C, Ross R, Smith B. (1994) *The Fifth Discipline Field book*. Doubleday, New York, New York.
- CDC Health Protection Goals, <http://www.cdc.gov/about/goals/default.htm>