

Direct from CDC's Environmental Health Services Branch

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A Diverse Environmental Public Health Workforce to Meet the Diverse Environmental Health Challenges of the 21st Century

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, we will feature a column from the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in every issue of the Journal.

EHSB's objective is to strengthen the role of state, local, and national environmental health programs and professionals to anticipate, identify, and respond to adverse environmental exposures and the consequences of these exposures for human health. The services being developed through EHSB include access to topical, relevant, and scientific information; consultation; and assistance to environmental health specialists, sanitarians, and environmental health professionals and practitioners.

EHSB appreciates NEHA's invitation to provide monthly columns for the Journal. EHSB staff will be highlighting a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health.

Increasing workforce diversity in the ever-changing field of environmental public health is essential to ensuring an effective environmental health profession capable of meeting the challenges of the 21st century. The health disparities faced by underserved communities are a harsh reality. The antecedents of many of these health disparities are environmental health conditions in which long-lasting, positive change can be brought about only by overcoming cultural and language barriers. Increasing the diversity of the environmental public health workforce and its leadership to more adequately reflect the diversity of the communities it serves is an important step toward overcoming these barriers and improving health for all Americans.

Regarding CDC's diversity policy, Dr. Julie Louise Gerberding, director of CDC, wrote in a 2006 memo to employees,

Having a diverse workforce allows for interactive creativity, innovative ideas, and fresh approaches to problem solving. Moreover, being inclusive of different perspectives enables us to reflect more accurately the rich tapestry of the national and world populations we serve. To accomplish this task, CDC must continually recruit, train, and retain employees with a broad range of backgrounds, value systems, and perceptions of the world.

Diversity: An Integral Part of CDC's Strategy

Increasing diversity in the environmental public health profession is a significant part of CDC's strategy for developing the workforce, which is Goal V in CDC's report, *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services* (www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Docs/nationalstrategy2003.pdf). Moreover, it is an important component of all six goals. CDC's diversity policy states, "To facilitate CDC's continued achievements in research, disease and injury prevention and control, and program excellence, we must continually recruit a multicultural staff."

The Environmental Health Services Branch of CDC's National Center for Environmental Health has supported a number of successful projects to increase diversity in the environmental public health workforce. Three such projects are discussed below.

The Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP)

AEHAP (www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Resources/AcadOrg.htm) has initiated several diversity projects as part of its cooperative agreement with EHSB. As a result of this work, the number of accredited environmental health programs at minority-serving institutions has grown from one to eight in the past four years. Indeed, the AEHAP committee itself reflects the diversity that the organization considers an important cross-cutting goal in

improving environmental health programs throughout the country.

AEHAP's efforts have increased the racial and ethnic diversity of environmental health students in a variety of environmental health programs—an important first step to increasing workforce diversity. Its support for innovative university projects in diversity recruitment and retention have helped yield a 31.5 percent increase in the number of minority students enrolled in accredited environmental health programs over the past four years. AEHAP plays an additional important role by guiding, assisting, and networking with academic institutions interested in increasing diversity.

Diversity Recruitment and Retention Model of Excellence

Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) and CDC collaborated in developing and piloting a diversity recruitment and retention model of excellence at EKU (www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Topics/workforce.htm). The objective was to develop and implement a model recruitment and retention program that could achieve racial and ethnic diversity among environmental health students and faculty and eventually in the environmental public health workforce. The model was developed and piloted at Eastern Kentucky University from 2003 through 2006 with tremendous success.

The first and most important step in this project was to involve a diverse group of experienced environmental public health professionals and leaders. To this end, EKU and CDC formed the National Environmental Health Diversity Recruitment Task Force (NEHDRTF), comprising environmental health professionals from federal, state, and local governments; academia; and industry. NEHDRTF worked with EKU and CDC from the strategic-planning stage to implementation and assessment of the model. The lessons learned and insights gained from this project have far-reaching applicability to both academic and workforce diversity development initiatives.

In evaluating the model, team members agreed that the following were the most important to its success:

- management commitment,
- partnering,
- including diversity in all strategic planning,
- a students-are-our-customers policy,
- targeted recruiting in diverse communities,
- encouraging parental involvement,
- curriculum that encourages diversity,
- faculty and student emphasis on recruitment as a way of life,

- diversity advisory council of environmental health practitioners, and
- active student environmental health association.

NEHDRTF created a diversity recruitment film titled *Environmental Health Science, Challenging and Diverse*, which has proven to be an excellent recruitment tool. More than 1,000 students have viewed the film. The success of the film led the Department of Health of Kentucky's Cabinet for Health and Family Services to collaborate with EKU to create a diversity recruitment film specifically for hiring environmental health professionals to work for state and local health authorities in Kentucky.

The National Council on Diversity in Environmental Health

NEHDRTF realized that to nationally disseminate the important lessons learned with its unique recruitment model and to assist other organizations, it should become a national organization. The task force initiated a strategic plan for organizational development by November 2005, and the National Council on Diversity in Environmental Health (NCODE Health) was formed soon after. NCODE Health is now seeking and contacting potential partnering organizations. Individuals and organizations interested in NCODE Health and its initiatives should contact Dr. Welford C. Roberts, currently NEHA second vice president, at welford@erols.com.

Conclusions

Diversity in student bodies and faculties is crucial to developing truly comprehensive environmental public health education programs and a diverse environmental public health workforce. Increasing diversity in the environmental public health workforce and leadership will help the nation meet one of the greatest challenges faced in the 21st century, resolving the disproportionately high number of environmental public health problems faced by underserved communities.

EHSB continues to search for innovative approaches to the challenge of increasing diversity in the environmental health workforce. Please send your comments and suggestions to ehsb@cdc.gov.

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