

Direct from CDC's Environmental Health Services Branch

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The Role of Environmental Health Practitioners in a Public Health Emergency

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. In the coming months, EHSB staff will be highlighting a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. This month's column discusses the role of environmental health practitioners in a public health emergency.

In their daily jobs or in a public health emergency, environmental health practitioners have the task of protecting the public's health from harmful elements in the environment. The 2005 hurricane season demonstrated the magnitude of environmental issues and response needs faced by communities in emergencies. Whether a disaster event is a hurricane, anthrax, or attacks such as those on the World Trade Center, environmental health practitioners have an important role to play in emergency response. Issues related to food, water, air quality, waste, vector control, and building environments will always exist.

Get Involved

Environmental health practitioners must be actively involved in local and state emergency response planning efforts. Emergencies vary greatly from region to region and from city to city. For example, communities near chemical plants face unique emergency response challenges. The planning process begins at the local level with determining the events that are most likely to occur in a community and developing appropriate local response plans, deciding who will respond and how, determining staffing and equipment needs, and practicing plan implementation.

Recognize the Value of Your Skills

Environmental health practitioners must understand how valuable their skills are

in responding to emergency events. The assessment of shelters for the 2005 hurricane evacuees is a great example of the use of these skills. Many of the environmental health issues that existed in the shelters were the same as those that practitioners assess during their regular duties. These issues include safe food preparation, safe and adequate supply of water, infection control/handwashing, solid waste disposal, vector control, general safety, sewage disposal, and adequate sanitation facilities. Ensuring that these issues are addressed and that systems are functioning properly is essential for protecting the health and safety of shelter occupants and visitors.

Take Advantage of Emergency Response Training

Emergencies frequently require environmental health practitioners to be flexible and apply their skills and knowledge across several areas of environmental health (e.g., food, water, waste, air quality, vector control). Practitioners expected to respond to emergencies often need to review the basics of environmental health and should be aware of technical updates.

At the 2006 NEHA Annual Educational Conference, a two-and-a-half-day course titled "Environmental Health in Disaster Response—Level 1" provided the basic review and technical updates needed for environmental health practitioners. The course outline is available at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ETP.

EHSB would like to know whether the content of this course is useful and appropriate, and meets the needs of environmental health practitioners. Please send your suggestions about this course and other types of training needs to ehsb@cdc.gov.

Meet Recovery Phase Challenges

The decision about when it is safe to re-enter and reoccupy a community after an emergency presents many challenges. Environmental health practitioners know how to evaluate a variety of environmental issues (e.g., food, water, waste, air quality, vector control); they address a variety of environmental health issues in their daily jobs and can translate science into practice. In emergencies they have the ability to collect, analyze, and translate environmental data. These abilities are a great asset for decision makers. Experienced environmental health practitioners are needed to lead the environmental health response to emergency events. Establishing and maintaining strong environmental health programs at the local and state levels helps to ensure that this leadership is in place.

Find and Obtain Help

The Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) can be a useful tool for requesting and receiving environmental public health assistance during an emergency or disaster. The environmental health issues that arose during the 2005 hurricane season demonstrated the need for environmental health practitioners and resources during emergencies. EHSB has taken the lead in establishing a work group with state, local, and federal partners to explore how environmental health resources can be effectively deployed through EMAC. To learn more about EMAC, go to www.emacweb.org. In addition, the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) has developed an information sheet, "EMAC Tips for State Health Agencies," that offers guidance on the use of EMAC. For a copy of the ASTHO information sheet, go to www.astho.org/pubs/EMACTips10.pdf.

Explore Resources

EHSB has developed an Emergency and Terrorism Preparedness Web site at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ETP that is specifically for environmental health practitioners. The site

groups information by major subject areas in which practitioners respond. It provides resource tools from national organizations, federal agencies, and state and local programs. EHSB would like your suggestions for new links and site improvements: Just click on the EHSB e-mail address beside the envelope icon near the top of each Web page to generate an e-mail message.

Conclusion

Environmental health practitioners have essential roles to play in emergency response. The public depends on practitioners to fulfill their roles every day as well as during emergencies. We must be engaged in planning and preparedness efforts to ensure that our roles are well defined and understood by other emergency responders and the public we serve. 🐾

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Managing Editor's Desk

continued from page 54

His words are stirring. Here are his expectations for the members of his PHS category:

1. Represent the category and the U.S. PHS with distinction, every day and everywhere. Expanding on this expectation, he urges his colleagues to attain distinction in everything they do, wear the uniform properly—even triple-checking it before they go out in public—and maintain all appropriate courtesies and customs of the service.
2. Be ready to deploy anywhere and anytime.
3. Be technically and tactically competent in all areas of environmental health and public health.
4. Seize initiative and be resourceful.
5. Be ethical in all you do.

Don't you just love it? What a standard to have, stand by, and be identified with.

When I spoke to this group, I admonished them to continue to do what they have been doing. I also encouraged the officers to be a constant source of encouragement to all of their peers across this great profession of ours. We have many inspiring stories and people in the many corners that make up this diversified profession of ours. We have, however, too few

instances of an entire group that charges out to its missions eager to show off our profession and demonstrate what it can do. If nothing else, this fine assembly of some 376 active-duty men and women shows what a group can do and, I believe, what an entire profession can do.

Thank you, environmental health professionals of U.S. PHS, for the invitation to be with you and for your shining example. I left your meeting with a huge energy boost. Keep the light shining from the corner of this diversified profession you work in. Your example and energy have the power to 1) extinguish some of the tiredness that we sometimes feel in environmental health and 2) give us all a vision for what an entire profession can look like.

For anyone interested in learning more about the U.S. PHS environmental health officer program, I encourage you to contact Joselito Ignacio at JIgnacio@comdt.uscg.mil.



P.S. I should also proudly mention that two of NEHA's board members, Rick Collins and John Steward, come from the ranks of the environmental health category of the U.S. PHS. 🐾

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