

Direct from CDC's Environmental Health Services Branch

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Developing the Environmental Health Workforce

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 development of the environmental health workforce.

The environmental health workforce may be defined as *the aggregate of public health professionals, educated, trained, and competent in the art and science of controlling factors in the environment that are detrimental to the health and well-being of humankind.*

Education, training, and competence are critical in developing and sustaining a workforce that can effectively anticipate, recognize, and respond to new and existing public health threats. Many challenges remain in developing such an environmental health workforce in the United States. Consider these national statistics and issues:

- Between 40 percent and 50 percent of the environmental health workforce will be eligible to retire within the next five years.
- More than 90 percent of the current workforce has no formal degree in public health or environmental health.
- Decades of high turnover have resulted in a workforce that is inexperienced, inadequately trained, and in need of emerging leaders to fill leadership roles rapidly being vacated because of large numbers of retirements.
- Extensive emergency response training is needed for emerging threats, including natural and human-made disasters.
- Many environmental public health programs are severely understaffed and are continuously seeking competent environmental health practitioners.

CDC's *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services* was released in 2003 and has become the cornerstone for CDC's efforts to improve the practice of environmental health in the United States. Of the six major goals of the strategy, Goal III (Foster Leadership) and Goal V (Develop the Workforce) target specific activities to build a strong environmental health workforce. The following describes workforce development activities funded or led by the Environmental Health Services Branch (EHSB) of CDC's National Center for Environmental Health. The partners mentioned represent a subset of the many outstanding organizations EHSB works with daily to revitalize environmental public health services.

The Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs (AEHAP)

A cooperative agreement between EHSB and AEHAP over the past five years has resulted in significant accomplishments, including the accreditation of four new undergraduate programs and three new graduate programs since 2003. Before 2003, a new program had not been accredited in more than 20 years. Accomplishments also include increases in

- enrollment (6 percent in the past two years),
- graduation rate (18 percent in 2005),

- racial and ethnic diversity of students (23.5 percent since 2002), and
- numbers of accredited programs at minority-serving institutions (from one in 2000 to six in 2006).

Four new programs will be presented for accreditation during the meeting of the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council at the 2006 NEHA Annual Educational Conference.

Environmental Public Health Leadership Institute (EPHLI)

EPHLI is the first program dedicated specifically to developing and enhancing environmental health leadership skills for the 21st century. The second EPHLI class began in February 2006. EPHLI was featured in the March 2006 edition of the *Journal of Environmental Health*.

Uniformed Services Environmental Public Health Career Initiative

This important project is a partnership of CDC, NEHA, AEHAP, and environmental health components of the Armed Forces. The project encourages retiring or departing military environmental health practitioners to consider career opportunities in environmental public health. The training, experience, and leadership skills possessed by many military environmental health practitioners could greatly enhance the capacity and skills of the nation's environmental public health workforce. The *Environmental Public Health Career Resource Guide for Uniformed Services Environmental Health Practitioners* was developed through the partnership and will soon be available on the EHSB Web site at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/default.htm.

Environmental Health Workforce Development Consortium

The consortium is a partnership of NEHA, EHSB, and various public health, educational, and legislative organizations. It works to support the workforce development goals established in CDC's revitalization strategy. The consortium is currently identifying "best practices" in environmental health. State and local environmental health programs will be invited to submit outstanding successful practices and efforts that can be shared with other programs throughout the country.

Capacity-Building Projects

Since 2001, EHSB has funded 25 state and local environmental health programs and university programs to improve environmental health capacity and expand the environmental health science base through implementation of the *Ten Essential Services of Environmental Health*. Many of the projects funded through these agreements are specific to developing the workforce. Project summaries and additional information can be found at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/CapacityBuilding/default.htm.

Environmental Health Competency Project

Developed through a partnership with the American Public Health Association and with assistance from numerous other organizations, this project established 14 core competencies for local environmental health practitioners. The published project report is located on the EHSB Web site at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Publications/Publications.htm.

EHSB Information Resources

Providing environmental health specialists with tools to enhance their knowledge and skills is critical to the workforce development initiative. EHSB has published several documents that environmental health specialists may find very useful. These resources can be found at www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Publications/Publications.htm. Several new or updated reference manuals will be added in the next few months.

Conclusion

EHSB continues to work on projects and concepts to benefit the environmental health workforce now and in the future. Ideas and comments from our state and local partners are always welcome. Please send your suggestions or comments to ehsb@cdc.gov.

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Visit www.neha.org/research to obtain the latest on the following NEHA federally funded programs, many of which include free or low-cost training and educational opportunities:

- ◆ Food Safe Schools Program
- ◆ Environmental Health Workforce Development Program
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- ◆ Epi-Ready Team Training Program
- ◆ Land Use Planning and Design Program
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