



Job Profile: Environmental Health Specialists **1/17/2008**

Environmental health specialists work at the intersection of the environment and human health. They play an important role in preventing outbreaks and responding to emergencies. While many are found at NCEH/ATSDR, they can be found throughout CDC. For other job profiles, see the Inside Stories on Medical Toxicologists, Health Economists, Microbiologists, Secretaries and more.

Mark Miller, RS, MPH, (CAPT USPHS), Sr. Environmental Health Officer, Environmental Health Services Branch, NCEH

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Mark Miller says environmental health practitioners are an important part of first-response efforts. When people think of disaster response, they often think of firefighters, police and EMT workers. Part of Miller's job is to advocate making environmental health practitioners as much a part of the first-response effort as those other players.



Local officials who track air quality, food and water safety, and disease-carrying vectors “know their communities better than anybody,” says Miller. So they are vital for preventing the illnesses that can be a devastating secondary effect of disasters such as flood, fire, tornadoes, or terrorist attacks.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Miller was part of a group of eight CDC staff that assisted county health officials in caring for the 15,000 evacuees housed at the vast Reliant Park in Houston (formerly known as the Astrodome). With the evacuees at high risk of communicable disease, Miller and the team ensured that volunteers practiced good hand hygiene, that food temperatures were adequate, that housekeeping measures were up to par, and the like.

Katrina is long gone, but environmental health practitioners are still an important part of the recovery effort, Miller says. For example, they oversee control measures in restaurants that are reopening. The recovery for many kinds of disasters “can last for years,” Miller says. “We always say we’re one of the first to get involved, and the last to leave.”

Through training programs and other support initiatives, Miller is helping local-level environmental health specialists prepare for disasters large and small. It’s a challenge at a time when public health departments are being asked to “do more with less,” he says.