



NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION

NEHA's 74th Annual Education Conference & Exhibition
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Focus Group Findings

Meeting the Challenges and Moving Forward

NEHA recognizes that the role of the environmental health professional is at a crossroad. Many environmental health programs, in the government, public, and private sectors are experiencing significant staff reductions. A recent NACCHO survey indicated that in the past two years, as many as 15% of the overall public health workforce has been eliminated. Such reductions reflect the economic trends; however, the interest and demand for certain types of environmental health expertise is increasing – healthy communities, sustainability, food safety, and clean air and water. While the economic reality of budget cuts and staff reductions is beyond NEHA’s ability to affect in direct ways, it can better understand their impact and explore ways to help environmental professionals respond to such challenges. It is not enough for society to recognize the need for environmental health professionals; it must make the necessary paradigm shift that environmental health IS societal health – in terms of both health and economics. Creating sustainable and economically viable programs allows communities, cities, and states to remain healthy while reducing expenses.

For many young people (and for many older professionals who are seeking new career paths), environmental health is as an alluring and exciting field of practice. It is contemporary, socially relevant, aimed at worthy goals such as improved health and environmental quality, people oriented, technically exciting (and challenging), and even politically intriguing. As students begin their quest to enter this profession, they take a well-rounded curriculum that equips them with a wide variety of skills and a broad based expertise. Thirty-one universities now offer an accredited environmental health science and protection undergraduate degree. Typically, the environmental health graduate, as well as the practicing environmental health professional, has a strong science base and math competence. Students also gain a broad based understanding of human health as well as environmental issues and concerns. This rich educational base has enabled graduating students to pursue careers in both the public and private sectors. (EHAC believes that half of these graduates go into the private sector and the other half into the public sector. EHAC also estimates that half of the half that goes into the public sector find their way into local health departments.)

One remarkable aspect about a background in environmental health is that the graduating student and experienced professional possess skills and experience in the following areas:

- Strong environmental science background
- Grounding in human health
- Policy understanding
- Communication skills
- Problem solving skills
- Real world field experience
- Critical thinking skills

This background gives rise to multiple opportunities to practice a variety of environmental health work across different employment settings. Clearly, environmental health is an occupational practice suitable for a vast variety of different employment settings. Both graduates of environmental health programs and experienced environmental health professionals are qualified to succeed across all of these opportunities.

Today – the realization that we are qualified to practice in a variety of employment settings is arguably more important than ever before. Many highly qualified and capable EH professionals who are working in local health departments are currently losing their jobs and/or their security thanks to the enormous – recession caused - financial pressures that are affecting governments (and their budgets). Moreover, these pressures are not only expected to continue for the near future, they are in the minds of many policy makers, becoming the new “normal” for local and state governments.

In this kind of employment environment, NEHA searches for ways to help our people. We hold enormous respect for the skill sets and the expertise within this profession. We also see that new jobs requiring this kind of expertise and experience are being created in communities across the country. These jobs, however, are materializing within agencies outside of health departments. The challenge thus becomes, how can we build bridges to these new opportunities?

Always moving forward, NEHA takes a proactive approach to discover how to help environmental health professionals use their existing knowledge, skills, and expertise to transition into areas and roles that are in demand by both local and state entities. At the 2010 Annual Educational Conference and Exhibition in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Regional Vice Presidents of the NEHA Board of Directors met with Affiliate Presidents in four focus groups.

Focus Group	Affiliate States	RVP moderators
1	Alabama, California, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, and Wisconsin.	RVP David Riggs RVP Sandra Long
2	Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, Industry, Kentucky, Michigan, Montana, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Tennessee and Virginia	RVP Enriquez RVP Dingman RVP Briggs
3	Arizona, Connecticut, Idaho, Iowa, Louisiana, National Capitol, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, Saudi Arabia, Texas, Washington and Wyoming.	RVP Kroeger RVP Ward
4	Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Jamaica, Maryland, Mississippi, NCLEHA, New Mexico, Northern New England, Past Presidents, South Carolina, Uniform Services and West Virginia.	RVP Packer RVP Custard RVP Steward

Purpose of the NEHA 2010 AEC Focus Groups

It is evident that capable environmental health professionals should be able to move into a variety of positions that match their skill and expertise levels. However, many of the communities that have launched such programs do not even know that this profession exists – let alone what it is capable of doing. This then brings the purpose of these focus groups into view.

Since many NEHA members work for local health departments and are familiar with the way their communities work, we are turning to you to ask for advice on what can be done to break down some of the barriers that are blocking our people from moving into these job opportunities. Our people have the expertise and experience to work effectively in many of these new programs. How can we help our people to find these positions?

If we could start migrating more and more of our profession into some of these new job opportunities, we can protect many of our people who are currently hanging on to their jobs by a thread. We can also expand the environmental health message and culture well beyond the stakeholders that are attached to health departments. Finally, we can introduce environmental health principles and values into some of the most exciting and socially relevant work occurring in communities across America today.

Focus Group Questions

NEHA asked each focus group to consider the following questions:

1. Give us an overview of the kind of sustainability, built environment, healthy community, global climate change etc. governmental positions that are emerging in your community today. Also, please identify which agency these positions are located in and how they are staffed.
2. Are environmental health professionals being considered for these positions? If so, why? If not, why not?
3. What will it take to get environmental health professionals considered for these positions?
4. What kind of messaging could NEHA do to make community policy makers aware that EH professionals can do this kind of work?
5. Are we our own worst enemies? Translation: Are we simply failing to apply for these positions? If that is so, what can NEHA do to excite EH professionals about these new opportunities and motivate more of our profession to get involved in these new areas of work?
6. What barriers exist that prevent our people from being considered for these positions?
7. What do we need to do to clear these barriers away?
8. Are we fighting any perception issues that environmental health is not meant to deal with these kinds of issues? If we are, what can be done to change those perceptions?
9. Any final comments, observations, or recommendations?

Question 1. Give us an overview of the kind of sustainability, built environment, healthy community, global climate change etc. governmental positions that are emerging in your community today. Also, please identify which agency these positions are located in or how they are staffed.

Answers varied on this question, some of the items mentioned included: reduce, reuse, and recycle efforts; community and local food supplies; participating in health impact assessments; floodwater issues, walkable communities and other land use planning issues. Many of these jobs appeared to be done as part of existing programs. No one person in the focus group mentioned a sustainability type position in their EH offices. Most sustainability positions seem to exist currently outside of Environmental Health programs.

Responses from another focus group centered on programs within Salt Lake City, Utah that has been using a sustainability program for approximately 1 ½ years, with minimal county-level funding. The program focuses on educating the public to modify behavior to positive affect climate and clean air changes, while promoting green businesses, reducing energy usage, and promoting recycling in foodservice establishments. The program also promotes the sharing of good practices and hiring environmental managers to oversee the program.

Question 2. Are environmental health professionals considered for these positions? If so, why? If not, why not?

Our discussion found the answer to be yes and no! The positions in which EH persons were considered for the positions appeared to be the result of good educational background and experience that met the job qualifications. When EH professionals were not considered, it was because a connection between the qualifications and the skill set was not made by either the applicant or the hiring agency. As mentioned above for the Salt Lake City program, environmental health professionals (managers) had key roles in the program.

Question 3. What will it take to get environmental health professionals considered for these positions?

Our profession needs to do a better job of recognizing that we are qualified for many of these jobs and we need to get in there and sell our qualifications and ourselves. Environmental health professionals need to be willing to adapt to new situations and be willing to seek out

credentials in sustainability to better market ourselves as needed. Environmental health professionals may need to specialize in the area to become more marketable.

Response from another focus group suggested providing environmental health students with senior project opportunities, monitored by a mentor. Such projects could not only generate student interest in environmental health, but also provide cost-saving opportunities for local programs.

Question 4. What kind of messaging could NEHA do to make community policy makers aware that EH professionals can do this kind of work?

Discussions included many things that could help sell the sustainability community on EH Professionals, some of those include distributing the Sustainability White Paper to people in the sustainability arena, marketing our profession to sustainability, continue building connections to sustainability folks etc... It was also mentioned that member professionals and NEHA need to promote the profession as well. Professionals can invite planning folks to lunch or get involved when a mayor or city manager is having a meeting on these issues, or attempt to initiate or facilitate sustainability programs if needed.

Question 5. Are we are own worst enemies? Translation: Are we simply failing to apply for these positions? If that is so, what can NEHA do to excite EH professionals about these new opportunities and motivate more of our profession to get involved in these new areas of work?

For the most part many thought we were our own worst enemy. A comment was made that “we were stuck to the Rice Bowl.” We do not want to leave our comfort zone and try something new. Many believed that EH professionals would be able to adapt into these types of jobs if they were willing to take on something new and earn new credentials. Another focus group expressed concern that the NEHA Journal of Environmental Health focused on technical matters, but have witnessed improvements lately.

Question 6. What barriers exist that prevent our people from being considered for these positions?

One barrier was answered in the question above in that EH professionals are not trying to get these jobs. Other barriers include that many people do not know about EH and what environmental health people are trained to do. This comes back to the marketing of the profession to the sustainability folks. The AEC in Columbus next year with ISSP is a step in the right direction. Another focus group believed that CDC publication still pushed traditional programs and that tenured professionals are not targeting innovative and non-traditional opportunities.

Question 7. What do we need to do to clear these barriers away?

The EH professional needs to be more willing to apply for and step into these types of jobs when available and we need to continue to build bridges with the sustainability community as well as continue to market our profession.

Question 8. Are we fighting any perception issues that environmental health is not meant to deal with these kinds of issues? If we are, what can be done to change those perceptions?

The group did not mention anyone who had experienced a perception problem. The problem is that environmental health professionals are too often “off the radar.” We need to let sustainability people know we have the education, skills, and willingness to perform in these roles.

Question 9. Any final comments, observations, or recommendations.

Several participants in this focus group mentioned that past focus groups had discussed and worked on the marketing of the profession. They believed that those discussions have not been followed through on or, if they have, the results have not been evident. Many believe that if environmental health was better marketed it would be easier for EH professionals to be considered for these expanding roles in the environmental health world.

One participant who worked in the private sector mentioned business continuity planning as an area for comparison to sustainability efforts in the public sector.