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You, Too, Can Have a Great Career in the U.S. Public Health Service

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 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.

In this column, EHSB and guest authors from across CDC will highlight a variety of concerns, opportunities, challenges, and successes that we all share in environmental public health. 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.

The conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CAPT Shepherd was with the branch as a senior environmental health officer (EHO) from 2003 to 2009 and was the chief EHO for the U.S. Public Health Service from 2005 to 2009. He is now learning to live "the retired life."

Many attendees at NEHA's Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition might wonder about the uniformed officers who also attend the conference. A few of these people in uniform are U.S. Navy and U.S. Army officers, but most are U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) Commissioned Corps officers. Most of those USPHS officers are environmental health officers (EHOs).

As a recently retired USPHS EHO, I would like to share some details about my more than

30 years in the U.S. Public Health Service and about how you can become a USPHS EHO.

30 Years of Service

I received my commission as a Commissioned Corps officer in the USPHS on July 1, 1979, and was assigned to what was then called the Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration, Saint Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, DC, as a staff sanitarian. The largest federally funded mental hospital

in the country, Saint Elizabeths housed approximately 2,000 mental patients and was essentially a city within a city. I gained extensive experience there in the areas of sanitation, food service, institutional environmental health, and more.

After my assignment at Saint Elizabeths, I spent the next 29 years serving other agencies in different positions, including

- U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA): consumer safety officer in Virginia;
- Indian Health Service (IHS): staff sanitarian, district sanitarian, and environmental health director in Maryland, Alabama, and Nashville, respectively; and
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Environmental Health Services Branch: senior EHO in Atlanta.

On November 1, 2005, Surgeon General Richard H. Carmona, the 17th Surgeon General of the United States, selected me to serve as the chief EHO of the USPHS, serving and representing both the Commissioned Corps and Civil Service environmental health professionals of the USPHS. This assignment, which was concurrent with my assignment at CDC, was a four-year term that ended on October 31, 2009.

Service Highlight: Mission in Central America

One of the best and most rewarding temporary duty assignments during my career was my service aboard the United States Naval Ship (USNS) *Comfort* from June 15 to October 15, 2007. I was the officer-in-charge of four USPHS teams and 71 USPHS officers (see photo).

The mission was part of U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Mike Leavitt's Initiative for Health Diplomacy in the Americas and supported President George W. Bush's advancement of social justice in the Western Hemisphere.

Through this initiative, Secretary Leavitt channeled technical and financial resources from the U.S. government and the private sector to improve health care for people in Central America. The coalition serving on the USNS *Comfort* included USPHS Commissioned Corps EHOs; dentists, physicians, nurses, and other health professionals from HHS; and military medical and humanitarian personnel. We spent approximately one week in each of 12 countries and provided many clinical, environmental health, veterinarian, and public health services in each country.

USPHS EHOs: A Growing Profession

As of September 15, 2009, 6,569 officers were in the USPHS Commissioned Corps. Of the 386 EHOs, 70% were assigned to IHS, FDA, and CDC (data not shown). Table 1 lists the 11 professional categories of the USPHS and their temporary grades. Temporary grades span from O-1 (typically Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program [COSTEP] students) to as high as O-9 and O-10.

The EHO category has shown slow, steady growth over the past 25 years (Figure 1). Since 1985 the category strength has increased approximately 39%. Today's EHOs are well-trained and capable officers who are assigned to many agencies and programs. In fact, a 2009 agreement signed by HHS and the U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) opens the door for more officers to be potentially assigned to one of the eight DOI agencies (e.g., the Bureau of Indian Affairs).

More and more EHOs are being called to active duty and assigned to FDA, and that trend will probably continue. The demand for well-trained, educated, capable, and versatile EHOs will remain high, and the category should continue its steady growth. In the past three years, the EHO category has called a total of 78 EHOs to active duty (Table 2). If this trend continues for the second half of 2009, we should have more than 35 EHOs called to active duty in 2009. That would be exceptional!



August 30, 2007: CAPT Shepherd (standing far left) with USPHS Team 3 as USNS *Comfort* exits the Panama Canal and heads to Port-Au-Prince, Haiti.

TABLE 1

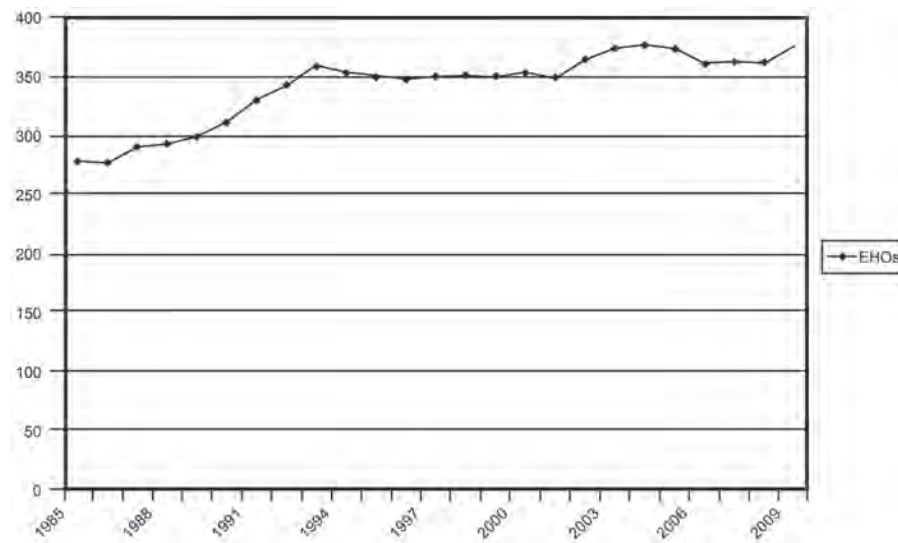
Temporary Grade* of U.S. Public Health Service Officers by Category (as of September 15, 2009)

Category	1 ENS	2 LTJG	3 LT	4 LCDR	5 CDR	6 CAPT	7 RADM	8 RADM	Total by Category
Medical	0	0	40	156	233	492	18	7	946
Dental	0	0	22	50	98	194	2	2	368
Nurse	1	115	230	501	389	285	5	1	1527
Engineer	0	34	51	102	134	100	3	1	425
Scientist	0	0	46	83	52	105	1	0	287
Environmental health	0	45	62	75	100	102	2	0	386
Veterinarian	0	0	7	24	15	45	1	1	93
Pharmacist	0	0	238	334	277	202	1	3	1055
Dietician	0	6	14	23	22	31	0	0	96
Therapist	0	2	17	62	39	25	1	0	146
Health services	153	112	262	362	220	127	4	0	1240
Total (by temporary grade)	154	314	989	1772	1579	1708	38	15	6569

* The Surgeon General of the United States holds the temporary grade of O-9. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Assistant Secretary for Health holds the temporary grade of O-10 if he or she elects to be a Commissioned Officer.

FIGURE 1

Active-Duty Environmental Health Officers (EHOs), 1985–September 15, 2009



The number of EHOs increased 38.8% from 1985 (278 EHOs) to 2009 (386 EHOs).

Want to Learn More?

I encourage those of you who may have interest to investigate opportunities with the USPHS. The EHO appointment standards are online (see **SIDEBAR**). If you have questions about the USPHS Commissioned Corps or want to learn more, contact the Blue Career Assignment Manager Team (<http://dcp.psc.gov/DCCA.ASPX>) or talk to one of the USPHS officers you see at a future NEHA AEC & Exhibition.

I cannot believe how my three decades of public health service have flown by. I have an immense respect and pride for the Commissioned Corps. In each of my assignments, I met and worked with outstanding public health professionals. I will miss wearing the uniform! 🇺🇸

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TABLE 2

Environmental Health Officers Called to Active Duty, 2007–2009 (Listed by Department/Agency)

Department/Agency	2007	2008	2009*	Total**
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency	1	1	1	3
U.S. Department of Agriculture	0	0	2	2
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services	–	–	–	–
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry	1	0	4	5
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	0	3	2	5
Food and Drug Administration	13	2	9	24
Health Resources and Services Administration	0	0	1	1
Indian Health Service	8	10	5	23
National Institutes of Health	1	1	3	5
Office of the Secretary	0	0	2	2
Program Support Center	1	1	1	3
U.S. Department of Homeland Security (includes U.S. Coast Guard)	1	3	0	4
U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Prisons	0	0	1	1
Total by year	26	21	31	78

* Data through September 15, 2009.

** By department/agency.

For More Information

- CDC Environmental Health Services Branch: <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs>
- FDA: <http://www.fda.gov>
- IHS: <http://www.ihs.gov>
- USNS *Comfort* mission photographs: <http://www.globalhealth.gov/news/photo/comfortphotos.html>
- USPHS:
 - EHO appointment standards: http://dcp.psc.gov/eccis/documents/CCI2_3_1_03.pdf (pages 7–8)
 - General information: <http://www.usphs.gov/AboutUs/>
 - Military pay: <http://www.dfas.mil/militarypay/militarypaytables/2009MilitaryPayTables.doc>
 - Uniform, rank, and insignia: <http://www.usphs.gov/aboutus/uniforms.aspx>
 - USPHS chief EHOs
 - » Current: <http://www.usphs.gov/profession/environmental/cpo.aspx>
 - » Previous: <http://www.ehopac.org/index.cfm?fa=cphistory>