

## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SERVICES WORKFORCE

### WHAT IS THE PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

- State and local health departments historically have been responsible for providing essential environmental health services to protect the public's health, including preventing or addressing problems with potable water, sewage systems, food safety, and vector control. However, new and emerging issues (e.g., highly toxic wastes, terrorism, newly discovered diseases) have arisen at a time when state and local capacities are limited.
- Local environmental health practitioners are the "frontline troops" in the public health battle to prevent disease, yet many have no formal training in environmental health or public health. There are currently only 23 accredited undergraduate and 3 accredited graduate programs in the field of environmental health.
- State and local environmental health programs do not have performance standards, and their activities may not coincide with community needs.
- Some state and local environmental health programs do not have the capacity to use the essential public health service approach to solve environmental health problems. Environmental health practitioners have inadequate resources to determine the role the environment plays in disease transmission. It was estimated in the year 2000 that 19,431 people are a part of the environmental health workforce employed by local health departments. This workforce makes up a small percentage of the total public health workforce and continues to shrink, further diminishing workforce capacity.

### WHAT HAS CDC ACCOMPLISHED?

CDC provides funding and technical assistance to public health agencies, associations, and universities to establish programs for developing a competent and effective environmental health services workforce. The following are recent examples:

- Funded the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs to expand the number of accredited programs teaching environmental health and to increase the number of graduates.
- Funded Tulane University and the University of Washington to develop training modules based on environmental sciences and public health for practitioners entering the field.
- Partnered with the American Public Health Association to sponsor the *Environmental Health Competency Project*, which outlines core competencies needed by environmental health practitioners to anticipate, recognize, and respond to environmental health challenges.

### WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

- Create an environmental health problem-solving methodology for environmental health practitioners.
- Develop the National Environmental Health Services Corps modeled after the Epidemic Intelligence Service. This 2-year program would teach and implement problem-solving methodology as part of a state or local field assignment.
- Implement an environmental health leadership institute.
- Make available to state and local programs environmental health performance standards based on the 10 essential services of public health.