

Direct from CDC

Environmental Health Services Branch

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Environmental Public Health Leadership Development

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.

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Enhancing the competence of environmental public health leaders is a primary objective of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) *National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services* (<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/Strategy.htm>). To address this priority, CDC's Environmental Health Services Branch, in collaboration with the National Environmental Health Association and the National Public Health Leadership Development Network, developed the Environmental Public Health Leadership Institute (EPHLI) in 2005. The institute was created to strengthen the environmental public health system by enhancing the leadership competence of national, state, local, and tribal environmental public health practitioners. In addition to enhancing individual leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities, EPHLI alumni have evolved into an expanding network of environmental public health professionals who continue to communicate, collaborate, and share expertise to improve practice and public health outcomes.

Four cohorts of participants, totaling 144 fellows from 40 states, have enrolled in the yearlong institute. The fifth cohort began the program this past February. Fellows, supported by faculty, mentors, and coaches, take part in onsite and offsite professional development education led by leaders in environmental public health and specialists in leadership development. The competency-based EPHLI curriculum includes the role of environmental public health, systems theory

and critical thinking skills, political issues, ethical decision making, collaboration and network development, conflict resolution, and team development.

EPHLI participants are required to develop an individual leadership development plan and a practice project that improves systemic environmental public health at the national, regional, state, or local levels utilizing theory, models, and methods presented in the curriculum. Utilizing a systems approach and action learning is critical to leadership development. This includes clarification of problems and issues within practice, creating systemic approaches to address problems, and influencing and facilitating change processes. The vision is to improve the ability of the environmental public health system to perform the assurance, assessment, and policy development functions outlined in the 10 essential services of environmental public health (<http://www.nwcp.org/centers-projects/environmental-health-center/10-essential> and <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/home/Health-Service.htm>). Ultimately, the objective is to focus the agenda of environmental public health on evidence-based practices that reduce emerging environmental public health threats and related morbidity and mortality.

The systems thinking approach (<http://www.infed.org/thinkers/senge.htm>) is a critical component of the EPHLI curriculum model. The approach utilizes principles, methods, and tools to analyze overall structures and patterns that impact environmental public health problems and develop systemic change strategies within

and among organizations and communities to improve essential services (<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/ephli/default.htm>), including

- enhancing strategic visioning and direction-setting skills through critical thinking and analysis (systems thinking), political effectiveness, and organizational and team development;
- using the core functions of public health as a foundation for achieving environmental public health goals and services;
- creating proactive leaders who can mobilize resources in response to the changing public health environment (core competencies);
- enhancing the performance outcomes of the essential services of environmental public health; and
- promoting and improving the delivery of systemic and integrated environmental public health services to communities.

Putting Principles into Practice

The practice projects completed by EPHLI fellows address both traditional and emerging environmental public health issues. A review of the practice project list reveals

familiar topics and issues: workforce development, recruitment and retention, improving coordination and collaboration, cultural competencies, performance standards and organizational improvement, health impact assessments, emergency response and recovery, outbreak response, vectors, water, wastewater, recreational water, and indoor air quality. The complete list is at <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/EPHLI/keywords.htm>.

Although these issues are familiar to most practitioners, a review of EPHLI projects provides examples of a unique problem-solving approach. From a systems thinking point of view, problems can be better defined and understood through root cause analyses. This approach allows problem-solving teams to use critical thinking skills and practical models and methods for creative problem solving. This results in the development of appropriate and sustainable systemic interventions. Fellows report that with a better understanding of a problem, they are better able to explain cause-and-effect relationships to others. These important insights are used to identify alternative strategies for change and to inform and influence critical decision makers.

The 144 practice projects developed by EPHLI fellows are problem-solving guides. Others who are working on difficult issues can benefit from this problem-solving approach, through review of these projects (<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/EPHLI/projects.htm>). Also, consider joining your colleagues as a fellow in the next EPHLI cohort and be a part of this network of environmental health leaders. Captain John Sarisky, the CDC manager of EPHLI, encourages participation in the institute because “EPHLI gives practitioners the tools needed to become better problem solvers. EPHLI is building a national network of problem solvers that are connected to the CDC National Center for Environmental Health. Building and strengthening these connections and this network may be the best way to foster system improvement and change.”

For additional information on EPHLI, visit www.heartlandcenters.slu.edu/ephli or e-mail Capt. Sarisky at Jsarisky@cdc.gov. 🐼

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N O M I N A T I O N S N O W A C C E P T E D

2009 Walter S. Mangold Award

The Walter S. Mangold Award, which recognizes extraordinary achievement in environmental health, has been presented since 1956 to the brightest and best in this profession. Nominations for this award may be made by an affiliate or by any five NEHA members, regardless of their affiliation.

Although the Mangold—NEHA's most prestigious award—is presented to an individual, it also honors an entire profession for its skill, knowledge, and commitment to public health. Nominations are due in the NEHA office by Monday, March 16, 2009.

For information, please visit www.neha.org/about/awardinfo.html. Members can obtain nomination forms by calling (303) 756-9090, extension 302, or by sending an e-mail to ghomyack@neha.org.