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Impact of Budget Cuts to Environmental Health Services at Local Health Departments: Key Findings

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, tribal, 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 conclusions in this article are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the CDC.

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sons. In addition, respondents indicated that some environmental health services that were not reduced or eliminated were still negatively impacted by budgetary constraints.

Key findings from the survey are summarized in the following categories.

Changes in Environmental Health Revenue

- Of the 75% of LHDs that were able to separate environmental health revenue from overall LHD revenue, 34.5% realized lower environmental health revenue than in the previous fiscal year.
- Eighteen and a half percent of LHDs realized higher environmental health revenue in their most recently completed fiscal year than in the previous fiscal year.

Impact on Environmental Health Workforce

- Nearly three out of 10 (29.1%) LHDs experienced a reduction of their environmental

The recent economic recession and its aftermath negatively impacted many local health departments (LHDs) across the U.S. Seven surveys conducted by the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) between August 2009 and February 2012 produced informative data (NACCHO, 2012). Each wave of the study showed that in comparing the current and prior fiscal years about 40% of LHDs nationwide had lower budgets, about 50% cut at least one program, and about 45% experienced staff reduction. Since 2008, LHDs lost almost 40,000 employees.

To learn specifically about changes to environmental health funding and the impacts of these changes on the environmental health workforce and services at LHDs, NACCHO surveyed a nationally representative sample of LHDs in March and April 2012. The study assessed changes between each respondent's most recently completed fiscal year and prior fiscal year. The study data indicated that environmental health revenue decreased for a substantial percentage of LHDs and that significant cuts to the environmental health workforce and to valuable environmental health services were made for budgetary rea-

TABLE 1

Percentages of Local Health Departments That Reduced or Eliminated Environmental Health Services for Budgetary Reasons (N = 280–291)

Environmental Health Service	Reduced or Eliminated (%)
At least one service	33.7
Food safety	12.8
Vector control	12.7
Ground water	10.7
Surface water	8.5
Drinking water	10.0
Recreational water	8.3
Indoor air	7.8
Outdoor air	3.2
Pollution prevention	5.3
Land use	5.6
Hazardous material	2.6
Air pollution	1.6
Hazardous waste	5.3
Animal control	6.8
Climate change	1.5

TABLE 2

Percentages of Local Health Departments for Which Budgetary Constraints Negatively Impacted Environmental Health Service Outcomes (N = 289–307)

Environmental Health Service	Negative Impact (%)
Any service	39.6
Food safety	20.7
Vector control	16.8
Ground water	14.9
Surface water	13.5
Drinking water	15.6
Recreational water	13.6
Indoor air	8.9
Outdoor air	3.2
Pollution prevention	6.9
Land use	7.1
Hazardous material	3.5
Air pollution	1.8
Hazardous waste	5.9
Animal control	8.8
Climate change	1.1

health staff for budgetary reasons in the form of layoffs or employee attrition where employees were not replaced because of hiring freezes or budget cuts.

- The number of job losses for the environmental health workforce at LHDs nationwide was estimated to be 1,350 (550 were laid off and 800 were lost to attrition and

not replaced because of hiring freezes or budget cuts).

- LHDs reported that job losses negatively affected their abilities to provide environmental health services, increased stress on the remaining workforce, and resulted in low employee morale. According to one respondent, personnel reductions due to budget cuts had “put an enormous strain on providing customary environmental health services.”

Reduction and Elimination of Environmental Health Services

- Many LHDs reduced or eliminated environmental health services for budgetary reasons (Table 1). Over one-third (33.7%) of LHDs reduced or eliminated at least one environmental health service.
- Environmental health services that were reduced or eliminated by the largest percentages of LHDs included food safety (12.8%) and vector control (12.7%).
- Environmental health services related to water (ground, drinking, surface, and recreational) were reduced or eliminated by the next largest percentages of LHDs.
- Multiple respondents noted reduced inspections of food establishments due to budgetary constraints. For example, one LHD “reduced food inspections from four times per year to three.”
- Several respondents indicated reduced vector control services and described impacts to mosquito control. Some examples included eliminating mosquito surveillance trapping, not spraying for mosquitoes as frequently, and not providing any mosquito control services.

Environmental Health Service Outcomes

- More than one-third (39.6%) of LHDs reported that budgetary constraints negatively impacted environmental health service outcomes (Table 2).
- Food safety, vector control, and services related to water were the top three areas for which LHDs reported that budgetary constraints negatively impacted service outcomes.
- Some respondents described decreased quality of work in attempting to meet unchanged or increasing workloads. Respondents also indicated that budget constraints had led to “reduced education and training.”

Moving Forward

With diminished resources, LHDs may be less able to provide customary services and respond to emergencies quickly and comprehensively. Recognizing the challenging conditions illustrated by the survey data, NACCHO supports staff at LHDs to advance the practice of environmental health by providing innovative resources to address existing and emerging issues and encourages LHDs to consider the following actions (see Sidebar):

- learn from peers through NACCHO's model practices program;
- use and share existing tools and resources developed by and for LHDs; and
- communicate, illustrate, and quantify the impact of budget cuts on environmental health service outcomes by telling their stories to the public and policy makers.

For the full survey report, more information about NACCHO's environmental health work, and links to additional resources, please visit www.naccho.org/topics/environmental.

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Quick Links: National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) Resources to Support Environmental Health

NACCHO environmental health program: Environmental health-related tools, publications, policy statements, and other resources. <http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental>

Toolbox: Free, online collection of local public health tools produced by members of the public health community. Current examples of tools include case examples, presentations, fact sheets, drills, evaluations, protocols, templates, reports, and training materials. Check out environmental health-related toolkits on climate change, environmental health in all policies, food safety, healthy community design, and Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH). <http://www.naccho.org/toolbox>

Model practices database: Online, searchable collection of innovative, peer-reviewed best practices across public health areas that allows users to benefit from their colleagues' experiences to learn what works, get strategies on how to implement effective programs with good results, and save time and resources. <http://www.naccho.org/topics/modelpractices/>

Stories from the field Web site: Web site that enables local health departments to share their experiences and demonstrate the value of public health. Stories from the field can be used to support advocacy, peer learning, and collaboration with state and federal partners. <http://www.nacchostories.org/>

Reference

National Association of County and City Health Officials. (2012). *Local health department job losses and program cuts: Findings from the January 2012 survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.naccho.org/topics/infrastructure/lhdbudget/upload/Research-Brief-Final.pdf>

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Did You Know?

NEHA is coordinating with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to offer four more Integrated Pest Management Workshops in the upcoming months. Learn more at www.neha.org/research/irprogram.html.

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