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Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health

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 these columns, EHSB and guest authors share insights and information about environmental health programs, trends, issues, and resources. The conclusions in this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of CDC.

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Zika virus, Legionnaires' disease, and the Flint, Michigan, water crisis are examples of diseases and events requiring a response from a prepared, sufficient, and equipped environmental health workforce. While demands continue to increase, diverse factors such as health department budget cuts and decreased capacity can negatively impact environmental health professionals and programs (Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, 2014; National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2013). These compounding factors reinforce the need to understand the environmental health workforce

to identify gaps in staffing, training, and ultimately, to ensure preparedness to meet future challenges. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services*, developed with input from numerous environmental health stakeholders representing governmental, nongovernmental, and academic organizations, identified the significance of conducting in-depth evaluations to ensure the existence of a sufficient and well-trained environmental health workforce with the capacity to provide quality services addressing community need (CDC, 2003).

Previous studies describing state, tribal, local, and territorial health departments have addressed aspects of environmental health staffing and services, yet there remains a critical need to engage environmental health professionals with a method designed specifically for the environmental health profession. In response, CDC, the National Environmental Health Association, and Baylor University are partnering on an innovative initiative to characterize the environmental health profession and understand the challenges environmental health professionals encounter. This effort, *Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH)*, presents an unprecedented opportunity to delve into the profession and understand environmental health professional demographics, education and training, experience, areas of practice, and the current and future needs of environmental health professionals.

Though the work of environmental health professionals and the services they deliver are critical to protect local communities, the profession often remains unknown to many until an event occurs and appears on the front page of the newspaper or the nightly news. An initiative like UNCOVER EH has the potential to increase awareness of the profession by obtaining information directly from environmental health professionals about their practice and the challenges they currently face and envision for the future. UNCOVER EH con-

FIGURE 1

Understanding the Needs, Challenges, Opportunities, Vision, and Emerging Roles in Environmental Health (UNCOVER EH) Logo



sists of two components—a comprehensive online survey and facilitated in-person workshops. Modeled after horizon scanning approaches, this methodology will lead to a thorough examination of the current workforce setting followed by identification and prioritization of challenges and needs (Brooks, Ankley, Boxall, & Rudd, 2013). This phase of UNCOVER EH focuses on environmental health professionals working at public health departments; however, there may be future opportunities to expand the survey to include environmental health professionals at other governmental and nongovernmental agencies, and in private industry.

Efforts are underway to identify and obtain e-mail addresses for environmental health professionals working at health departments across the nation. The identified individuals will receive an e-mail requesting their voluntary participation and will contain a unique web link to access the UNCOVER EH online survey. The survey was designed to collect essential information about the needs of environmental health professionals, professional demographics, education and training, areas of practice, competencies, and the skills and resources necessary to meet evolving and emerging issues and challenges. The survey elements were designed to align with established public health workforce frameworks and assessments (Boulton et al., 2014; Sellers et al., 2015). The survey is expected to take approximately 30 minutes to complete. The information collected will be aggregated for analysis, which prevents linking respondents to their responses. Fol-

“Workforce evaluations are needed to ascertain the current level of competence, methods of training, effect of training, effect of the ‘essential services’ approach to environmental public health, relations between competencies and practices as they pertain to community-based needs, information that reaches the environmental public health workforce, and effect of workforce-directed activities on the level of competence and job performance.” (p.19)

— *A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs/publications/strategy.htm)

lowing the online survey, several in-person workshops will be held. The workshops will bring together environmental health professionals to review and distill the survey findings and prioritize grand challenges and future needs.

UNCOVER EH will result in a national-level description and analysis of the environmental health profession. The results of this initiative will be made publicly available in a comprehensive report. The report is intended to provide important information for ensuring that the workforce is prepared to address current and future environmental health issues, as well as for shaping the delivery of environmental health services and increasing positive health impacts. UNCOVER EH is scheduled to launch fall 2017 with the release of the online survey. In the meantime, environmental health professionals are encouraged to watch for updates and help increase the awareness of this important initiative. It is crucial to hear from environmental health professionals across the nation to assure generalizable results and broad representation of environmental health challenges, needs, and opportunities. To learn more about UNCOVER EH, please visit www.neha.org/uncover-eh. 🐞

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