Building Environmental Health Services Workforce Capacity

What Is the Public Health Issue?

- 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. In 2000, an estimated 19,431 people made up the environmental health workforce employed by local health departments. This workforce is a small percentage of the total public health workforce and continues to shrink, further diminishing workforce capacity.
- New and emerging issues (e.g., highly toxic wastes, terrorism, newly discovered diseases) have arisen at a time when state and local emergency health services 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. Only 29 accredited undergraduate and 7 accredited graduate programs exist 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.

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. 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. Tulane University developed 24 Web-based training modules related to drinking water, lead poisoning prevention, vector control, chemical terrorism and introduction to toxicology, and environmental services in Louisiana. The University of Washington developed an interactive training CD-ROM, Essential Services of Environmental Health, which was mailed to approximately 4,000 state, local, and tribal environmental health officers.

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Building Environmental Health Services Workforce Capacity, Continued

- 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.
- Launched an environmental health leadership institute. The first group of fellows began coursework in 2005 and graduated in 2006. The second group of fellows will graduate in 2007; applications are now being accepted for the class of 2007–2008.

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.
- Make available to state and local programs environmental health performance standards based on the 10 essential services of public health.

For further information about this or other CDC programs, visit http://www.cdc.gov/programs.

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