

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Let Your Light Shine— Claim Your Space!

Environmental health is the second largest workforce in public health (Ryan et al., 2021). Despite our numbers within the public health workforce, we remain largely unnoticed and underappreciated.

We as environmental health practitioners are more than the enforcers of environmental health laws and regulations (i.e., the “environmental health police”). We are educators, changemakers, and protectors of the public at every moment of their daily lives. We are involved in food safety, wastewater disposal and control, recreational waters, water quality, and air pollution, just to name a few of our areas of responsibility. The animated video from the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2021), *Environmental Health Professionals: Your Unseen Army of Protectors*, highlights our role in protecting our communities as environmental health scientists. As such, we are doers not talkers.

In many societies, self-promotion is viewed negatively, but if we do not promote ourselves then who will? NEHA has embarked on renewed efforts to highlight the profession and the work we do, how we impact human lives, and how we protect the environments we live in. We all must do our part, now! Therefore, it is essential to educate our peers, principals, and communities on who we are and what we do. We need to claim our space and let our light shine.

In preparing for my second column, I wondered what was special about September. September is National Disaster Preparedness Month and National Food Safety Education Month. More importantly for environmental

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health, we celebrate World Environmental Health Day on September 26. This celebration solely focuses on our profession and ourselves! How do we seize the moment? What do we do? Where do we go?

We can learn from other practitioners about what they have done to promote the profession and celebrate our successes. In 2018 when I was the regional vice-president of NEHA's Region 9, I was invited by Phyllis Amadio, president of the Connecticut Environmental Health Association, to present the NEHA Certificate of Merit to their board of directors. They did sterling work in getting World Environmental Health Day proclaimed as Connecticut Environmental Health Day. And a year later, they convinced the Connecticut governor to declare the entire week as Environmental Health Week. We can take a page out of their book and contact legislators, governors, mayors, county board members, and other management groups to issue proclamations for World Environmental Health Day.

When I taught the communication module of the leadership workshop held as a preconference offering at the NEHA Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition, I encountered Wesley Nicks, director of environmental health in Placer County, California. Wesley's office produced a local video highlighting all that environmental health does to protect their community, which stars his environmental health team (Placer County, 2019). In my first stint as a local public health director, I filmed two segments on food safety in the home for local cable TV. Engage with your local cable access TV station, they are always looking for content and will work with you to tell your story and educate your communities. Always be on the lookout to build relationships that will promote what you do.

We can also look into hosting a regular program about environmental health guidance and tools the public can use to assist us in achieving our goals. Environmental health practitioners can bring and share their scientific knowledge to improve behaviors and reduce environmental health risks in the community.

In the post COVID-19 pandemic period, where I worked in Waterford, Massachusetts, was inundated with rodent complaints. My chief environmental officer came to me with an idea she wanted to develop after discussing it with her team. They were concerned that using natural jack-o'-lanterns (i.e., pumpkins) would provide food for rodents and draw them to homes. They wanted to recommend using artificial jack-o'-lanterns for the Halloween season, as well as provide alternative options for people who chose to

use natural pumpkins for their jack-o'-lanterns (e.g., displaying them 6 ft up off the ground, displaying them in a window, bringing them indoors at the end of the evening). They issued a press release with these ideas and it was picked up and carried by three local TV stations. Acting as an advisor instead of a regulator will have significant returns as we celebrate ourselves.

NEHA is actively claiming space in print and other media to advocate for the profession. You can also advocate for the profession by using your scientific knowledge and writing an article for your local newspaper to educate the community about environmental health, celebrate your environmental health successes, and guide positive behaviors among your communities.

The other thing you can do is host an educational forum on a timely environmental health concern that needs to be addressed. Ask for time on the agenda of your legislative or supervisory boards and present on that subject, where you will have a broader community impact.

Alternatively, host an open house for the community, with all your scientific testing equipment on display. Let visitors touch them, explain what they are used for, discuss how the data are gathered from the tests, and highlight how the data are used to prevent disease and injury. Yes, be the scientist not the regulator. Share your knowledge. Your public will respect you for it, and you can build relationships and create support without asking for it.

Lastly, celebrate yourself. Put out a banner proclaiming Environmental Health Day, recognize each other, give the deserved pat on the back to each other, hold a breakfast or luncheon (potluck or catered), and laugh and enjoy yourselves in the knowledge that you have done a good job.

Be proud of who you are and let us join together in celebrating World Environmental Health Day on September 26 by letting your light shine and claiming your space!

I end my column with the lyrics from *We Are the World*, written by Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie in 1985:

"There's a choice we're making
We're saving our own lives
It's true we'll make a better day
Just you and me" ✨


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