VOICE FROM YOUR ASSOCIATION

Building the Environmental Health Workforce for a Changing Profession

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Editor's Note: As we continue our mission to build, sustain, and empower an effective environmental health workforce, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) is excited to introduce a new column in the *Journal*. This platform provides our staff, leadership, representatives, and committees the opportunity to share their valuable insights and expertise on key issues shaping our field. Aligned with our vision of healthy environments, protected communities, and empowered professionals, this column serves as a space to engage our community and extend our influence in advancing the environmental health profession.

Through this column, we aim to further our commitment to thought leadership by delivering timely, essential content that resonates with our members and the broader environmental health community. By fostering dialogue around emerging challenges, innovative solutions, and best practices, we will continue to ensure that NEHA remains a trusted source of knowledge and a catalyst for positive change. We look forward to leveraging the voice of our association to shape the future of environmental health.

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Environmental health is at yet another defining moment.

Across the country, environmental health professionals are responding to increasingly complex threats—emerging pathogens, severe weather events, socioeconomic influences on community health, technological change, and evolving regulatory landscapes. At the same time, agencies are navigating workforce shortages, high turnover, generational shifts in learning styles, and growing public scrutiny. The expectations placed on today's environmental health workforce extend far beyond routine inspections. They require analytical judgment, scientific reasoning, risk communication under pressure, and defensible decision-making in environments where the stakes are high and the margin for error is small.

The question before us is not whether our workforce is committed, it is whether we are equipping that workforce with the tools required for the future. Recent national workforce analyses conducted by the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2025a, 2025b)—including analysis of exam data and the job task analysis for our Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential, and membership survey data—reveal both strength and vulnerability in our profession and offer a roadmap for action.

What the Data Tell Us

NEHA's internal *Environmental Health Workforce Capacity Development Priorities Report* draws from multiple sources: the *Environmental Public Health Training Needs Assessment* (NEHA, 2024), REHS/RS exam item performance data for 2020–2025 (NEHA, 2025b), the 2025 REHS/RS job task analysis (NEHA, 2025a), Certified Environmental Health Technician (CEHT) exam mapping, and membership survey data. Across these data sources, a consistent pattern emerges.

The workforce demonstrates strong foundational competence in routine, procedural, and inspection-based work. Exam performance is strongest in blueprint areas aligned with inspections and prescriptive regulatory tasks, competencies reinforced through rep-

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etition and daily field application (NEHA, 2024; 2025b).

Multiple datasets, however, independently identify persistent gaps in analytical, evaluative, and judgment-based practice. Lower performance and lower perceived preparedness are evident in areas requiring data interpretation, evaluation of intervention effectiveness, verification of risk reduction, plan review and variance evaluation, surveillance activities, and risk communication (NEHA, 2024; 2025a, 2025b).

The 2024 *Environmental Public Health Training Needs Assessment* reinforces this finding. While essential skills such as conducting inspections and investigations are rated highly relevant, staff preparedness lags in areas including adaptation to extreme weather variability, hazardous materials response, scientific reasoning in exposure assessment, and communication and professional skills (NEHA, 2024).

Perhaps most notably, the workforce capacity report frames the profession's central challenge as strengthening the ability of environmental health professionals to "move from observation to defensible action" (NEHA, 2024). That framing captures the evolution of our role in not just identifying violations but also interpreting evidence, evaluating causation, communicating risk, and defending decisions grounded in science and policy.

Respondents Emphasized Clear Priorities

Qualitative responses from nearly 500 professionals nationwide underscore this need for structured development (NEHA, 2024). Respondents emphasized:

- The urgent need for an introductory environmental public health orientation to establish consistent foundational competence
- Tiered training models (e.g., foundational, intermediate, advanced) to accommodate varying levels of experience
- Role-specific modules tailored to inspectors, supervisors, and directors
- Scenario-based, hands-on learning experiences to strengthen the application of knowledge
- Flexible delivery formats to address staffing shortages, rural access challenges, and budget limitations

Barriers to learning or training participation are also clear: lack of funding for travel (66%), travel approvals (59%), competing agency priorities (52%), lack of time (51%), and insufficient relief staff (49%) (NEHA, 2024). These constraints demand innovative, accessible learning models.

A Lifecycle Approach to Workforce Development

In response, NEHA has embraced a lifecycle approach to workforce development, one that supports professionals from entry-level onboarding through credentialing and advanced practice.

Foundational Onboarding

The single highest-priority recommendation from the national assessment was the development of an introductory orientation course for environmental public health professionals (NEHA, 2024). Such a course provides a shared baseline, accelerates time-to-competence, reduces supervisory burden, and builds professional confidence early in a career.

Tiered and Advanced Capacity Building

Beyond foundational knowledge, the data points toward strengthening analytical and evaluative competencies, including root-cause analysis, causal reasoning, surveillance interpretation, verification of risk abatement, and communication under pressure (NEHA, 2024, 2025a). A tiered training structure allows professionals to progress systematically as their responsibilities expand.

Credentialing as a Professional Milestone

Credentialing remains a cornerstone of professional growth. NEHA's recently launched self-paced REHS/RS Online Study Course completes a deliberately structured learning portfolio grounded in the validated REHS/RS job task analysis.

Designed to bridge foundational knowledge and applied regulatory decision-making, the course complements the REHS/RS Study Guide and REHS/RS Practice Exam, creating a cohesive continuum that supports readiness, reinforces understanding, and builds confidence (www.neha.org/rehs-rs-credential). Importantly, the modular, self-paced format allows agencies to use the course as more than just an exam-preparation tool. It could also integrate into onboarding, mentoring, and professional development plans without requiring travel or extended time away from field duties.

Meeting Professionals Where They Are

Environmental health professionals operate in widely varied contexts—rural and urban, generalist and specialist models, centralized and decentralized governance structures. The national assessment revealed strong preferences for in-person and conference-based training for immersive learning, alongside significant demand for brief, modular, asynchronous formats that accommodate workload realities (NEHA, 2024).

A blended education portfolio—combining instructor-led experiences, conferences, scenario-based training, and accessible, self-paced modules—is essential for meeting these diverse needs while reducing barriers to participation.

A Call to Action

Workforce development is not optional. It is a strategic investment in community protection.

The data behind this report represent real professionals navigating real constraints, such as heavy workloads, limited staffing, evolving hazards, and high expectations. The findings are not a critique of the workforce. They reflect how much the role has expanded.

You told us you need stronger onboarding, clearer progression pathways, practical scenario-based learning, and flexible formats that respect time and budget realities. We heard you. The education resources we are building are shaped directly by that feedback. They are designed to reduce burden, strengthen confidence, and support you at every stage of your career.

Workforce development is not about asking more of you. It is about equipping you for the work you are already being asked to do. Our aim is to provide you with those tools.

Disclaimer: The conclusions of this column are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position of NEHA.

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Professional Testing, Inc. (2025a). *Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) job task analysis* [Unpublished report].

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PROGRAMS ACCREDITED BY THE NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH SCIENCE AND PROTECTION ACCREDITATION COUNCIL

The following colleges and universities offer accredited environmental health programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels (where indicated). For more information, please contact the institutions directly or visit the National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council website at www.nehspac.org.

Baylor University†
https://artsandsciences.baylor.edu/health-education/environmental-health-science

Benedict College
https://benedict.edu/school-of-science-and-engineering/chemistry-physics-environmental-health-science-department/environmental-health-science-program

California State University at Northridge†
https://www.csun.edu/health-human-development/environmental-occupational-health

California State University at San Bernardino
https://www.csusb.edu/health-science-human-ecology/environmental-health-science

Central Michigan University
https://www.cmich.edu/program/environmental-health-safety

Colorado State University
https://vetmedbiosci.colostate.edu/degree-programs/undergraduate/bs-bms/environmental-public-health

East Carolina University†
https://hhp.ecu.edu/hep/environmental

East Central University
https://www.ecok.edu/academics/find-major-program/environmental-health-science.php

East Tennessee State University
https://www.etsu.edu/cph/eh

Eastern Kentucky University†
https://www.eku.edu/chs/environmental-and-public-health-administration-and-medical-sciences

Fort Valley State University††
https://www.fvsu.edu/academics/public-health-graduate-degree

Illinois State University
https://illinoisstate.edu/academics/environmental-health-sustainability

Mississippi Valley State University††
https://www.mvsu.edu/department-natural-sciences-and-environmental-health

Missouri Southern State University
https://www.mssu.edu/academics/education/environmental-health

Montana State University
https://catalog.montana.edu/undergraduate/agriculture/environmental-sciences/environmental-health

Ohio University
https://www.ohio.edu/chsp/social-public-health/environmental-health-science/undergraduate

Old Dominion University
https://www.odu.edu/academics/programs/undergraduate/environmental-health

State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry
https://www.esf.edu/academics/undergraduate/environmental-health.php

Texas Southern University
https://tsu.edu/academics/colleges-and-schools/cophs/departments-and-programs/environmental-health.php

University of Findlay†
https://www.findlay.edu/sciences/environmental-sustainability

University of Georgia, Athens
https://publichealth.uga.edu/departments/environmental-health-science

University of Illinois Springfield††
https://www.uis.edu/public-health/academic-programs/environmental-health-mph

University of Pittsburgh††
https://www.publichealth.pitt.edu/eoh/degree-programs/mph-environmental-and-occupational-health

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University of Wisconsin Eau Claire
https://www.uwec.edu/academics/programs/undergraduate/environmental-public-health

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh
https://www.uwosh.edu/biology/undergraduate/majors/environmental-health

West Chester University
https://www.wcupa.edu/healthSciences/health/enHealth

Western Carolina University
https://www.wcu.edu/learn/programs/environmental-health/index.aspx

Western Kentucky University†
https://www.wku.edu/publichealth

† *University also has an accredited graduate program.*
†† *Accredited graduate program only.*