

► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Guardians of Health: The Enduring Legacy of the Environmental Health Practice

Environmental health practitioners rarely stand in the spotlight, yet our work shapes the safety and stability of every community. We prevent illness before it begins; protect families who might never know our names; and strengthen the foundation of public health with every inspection, investigation, and conversation. Our work is often invisible, but it has always mattered. When we look back across history, we find ourselves woven into every chapter of progress.

As European settlements in North America grew in the 1600s, colonists faced contaminated water, waste-filled streets, and unsafe food due to the lack of sanitation systems. Historical accounts of early communities, such as those documented by Brown (1988), show how these challenges pushed settlers to create ordinances regulating wells, privies, and livestock placement, the earliest versions of the water protection and sanitation programs we manage today. Long before colonists arrived, Indigenous nations had already developed sophisticated environmental stewardship systems grounded in reciprocity and ecological balance. Their practices remind us that environmental health is not just a profession—it is a relationship with the world around us.

In 1850, Lemuel Shattuck published the *Report of the Sanitary Commission of Massachusetts*, a document that transformed public health in the U.S. As Rosen (2015) explains, Shattuck called for clean water, sewage systems, waste removal, food safety oversight, and local health departments—all ideas that were far ahead of their time. Many of his rec-

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ommendations became the backbone of modern environmental health practice. Shattuck did not just outline a system, he articulated a vision in which every community deserves the conditions necessary for health. Environmental health practitioners continue to bring that vision to life.

Quarantine stations were established to control smallpox, yellow fever, and cholera—some of the earliest organized disease-control efforts in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2021) Museum, the Marine Hospital Service, founded in 1798, became responsible for federal quarantine operations, forming the roots of the modern U.S. Public Health Service and later CDC. These early actions set the stage for the public health systems we rely on today.

In the early 1900s, environmental health proved its power on a global stage. During the construction of the Panama Canal, William C. Gorgas led a sweeping mosquito control and sanitation campaign that eliminated yellow fever from the Canal Zone and dramatically reduced malaria. Sutter (2007) describes how these environmental interventions—draining water, improving waste systems, and controlling vectors—made the canal's completion

possible. It remains one of history's clearest demonstrations that environmental health saves lives and enables progress.

The acceptance of germ theory in the late 1800s revolutionized public health, leading to investments in piped water, filtration, and sewage treatment, which are among the most effective disease-prevention measures ever implemented. Duffy (1992) noted that these developments fundamentally reshaped public health practice. The 20th century brought new challenges: industrial pollution, chemical hazards, and environmental degradation. Events such as the Donora smog of 1948 and the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 sparked national awareness and led to the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and landmark environmental laws. More recently, the Flint water crisis reminded the nation that environmental health is not just technical work—it is ethical work. It is about fairness, dignity, and the right of every person to live in a safe environment.

Environmental health practitioners are scientists, investigators, educators, communicators, and problem solvers. We walk into kitchens, factories, homes, and neighborhoods and ask the questions others overlook: Is this safe? And if not safe, how do we make it safe? The National Environmental Health Association (NEHA, 2026) defines our mission as preventing illness and promoting well-being by reducing exposure to harmful physical, chemical, and biological agents. It is a mission rooted in service and in hope.

Every day, we continue a story that began centuries ago—a story of resilience, innovation, and people who cared enough to act. Environ-

mental health has never been about recognition. It has always been about people and their safety, dignity, and future. When we look at the arc of history, from colonial sanitation laws and Shattuck's vision to the Panama Canal and modern environmental justice, one truth becomes clear: Our work has always changed lives, often in ways the world never sees.

And that is what makes this profession extraordinary. We stand in a long line of quiet protectors and innovators. We carry forward a legacy built by previous professionals who believed that healthier environments create healthier futures. Every day, with every action we take, we add our own chapter to that story. Environmental health is not just what we do, it is who we are. And the world is better because we are here.

Larry Gordon (1991), an environmental health hero and winner of the 1961 NEHA

Walter S. Mangold Award, wrote what we all know: "Environmental health is basic to enhancing the status of the nation's health." ✿



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