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Building the Bench: How EHAC Programs and Health Departments Can Partner to Expand and Sustain the Environmental Public Health Workforce

Editor's Note: To promote the growth of the environmental health profession and the academic programs that fuel that growth, the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) has teamed up with the National Environmental Health Science & Protection Accreditation Council (EHAC) to publish two columns a year in the *Journal*. The mission of EHAC is to enhance the education and training of students in environmental health science and protection.

Through this column, EHAC will share current trends within undergraduate and graduate environmental health programs, as well as highlight available resources and the efforts to further the environmental health field. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of NEHA.

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Workforce shortages in environmental public health remain an ongoing and persistent challenge, limiting the field's ability to effectively protect and promote community health. Approximately 50% of public health employees in state and local agencies left their positions between 2017–2021, and approximately 50% of state and local public health employees were expected to leave or retire by 2025 (Leider et al., 2023). Additionally, 24% of the current environmental public health workforce is over 55 years of age, with one

in four planning to retire in the next 5 years (de Beaumont Foundation, 2025; Gerding et al., 2019). These significant workforce losses—compounded by persistent funding constraints and the struggle to recruit and retain professionals—continue to strain system capacity and hinder delivery of essential public health services.

At the same time, colleges and universities face increasing pressure to demonstrate the value of their public health degrees, including environmental public health degree programs that might simultaneously have strong

vitality and low student enrollment numbers. Regardless of student cohort size, these programs produce highly employable graduates who can “hit the ground running” as they enter the workforce. This outcome underscores program effectiveness and long-term benefits to students, the environmental public health workforce, and communities.

While graduates of degree programs accredited by the National Environmental Health Science & Protections Accreditation Council (EHAC) provide a robust foundation of workforce-ready employees, the number of graduates remains insufficient to meet current workforce needs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2024; de Beaumont Foundation & PHNCI, 2021). Accordingly, creating and strengthening workforce pathways within graduates' local communities provides opportunities for graduates to support their hometowns while offering local health departments valuable recruitment pathways focused on individuals already invested in their communities.

What EHAC-Accredited Programs Bring to the Table

Collaboration between EHAC-accredited degree programs and health departments that emphasizes educational access to local public health departments is a practical solution to addressing workforce needs. Graduates of EHAC-accredited degree programs are widely recognized as workforce-ready, equipped to address complex environmental public health challenges across local,

state, and federal agencies, as well as private industry. Guidelines and requirements of EHAC accreditation produce curricula built with strong foundations in mathematics and science, along with a core focus in environmental public health areas such as toxicology, epidemiology, biostatistics, water and food safety, and disease control, with additional emphasis on applied, practice-ready training and communication.

As a result, graduates develop the skills and competencies needed to effectively manage complex environmental public health issues. This preparedness benefits employers financially by reducing the need for additional training often required for hires with other educational backgrounds. Furthermore, graduates of EHAC-accredited programs are eligible to sit for the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential examination through the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). These advantages strengthen hiring pathways, reduce the burden on health departments with limited resources, improve public health outcomes, accelerate onboarding, enhance compliance, and support efficiency and long-term cost savings.

Internship and Practicum Pathways to Grow Your Workforce

A key aspect of undergraduate curricula in EHAC-accredited programs is the required 180-hr practice-based internship. Internships provide students with an opportunity to “test drive the profession” while also benefiting environmental public health agencies. Structured internship placements enable students to gain practical experience that strengthens their problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, while employers gain short-term workforce support and opportunities to evaluate and recruit competent future employees.

Recruiting student interns from EHAC-accredited degree programs for positions in local and state health departments helps build a pathway for job-ready graduates who are already familiar with the region's unique environmental public health challenges and regulatory landscape. Prioritizing the recruitment of students from within the region further strengthens this pathway by increasing the likelihood that graduates will remain in their communities, supporting long-term

workforce stability and continuity in local public health services.

Establishing and sustaining workforce pathways requires strong collaboration between academic programs and community agencies to ensure graduates are fully prepared to meet the evolving needs of the profession. Active engagement with local and state health departments allows EHAC-accredited degree programs to align curricula with current and emerging skill needs, and to incorporate practitioner feedback on competency, technology, and regulatory changes. This ongoing dialogue helps ensure that graduates are not only grounded in their knowledge but also job-ready on the first day and equipped with practical skills and professional awareness that enable them to meet the demands of their environmental public health roles.

Benefits of collaboration between EHAC-accredited degree programs and public health departments can be greatly enhanced through partnership with NEHA (n.d.) via the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHIP). NEPHIP opportunities are available exclusively to students enrolled in EHAC-accredited degree programs; they provide local as well as nationwide environmental public health internship opportunities.

Mutual Benefits And Shared Challenges

Partnerships between EHAC-accredited degree programs and practicing environmental public health professionals strengthen workforce preparation and support the alignment of educational preparation with professional demands. This connection provides employers with early access to emerging talent who already understand local systems, priorities, and regulatory contexts. Also, it reduces employee onboarding time and facilitates a smooth transition of graduates into professional practice.

This workforce pathway greatly benefits communities through a stable and locally trained environmental public health workforce. Such a workforce supports succession planning by creating a more predictable pathway for qualified and competent environmental public health professionals. In addition, educating and training students within the communities they might later serve increases the likelihood of long-term job retention and

commitment, contributing to continuity in public health services and stronger alignment between workforce capacity and local community needs.

While internships offer valuable benefits for students, employers, and communities, it is important to anticipate potential challenges and take a proactive approach to addressing them. Limited funding remains a significant barrier for many local health departments seeking to support student interns and preceptors. EHAC-accredited degree programs can partner with public health departments to identify funding opportunities through sources such as NEPHIP, state health departments, and environmental protection agencies. Beyond supporting summer internships, collaboration with these agencies can help states directly fund environmental health trainee positions and strengthen academic-state partnerships that create a pathway for students into environmental health careers.

Administrative coordination between EHAC-accredited degree programs and local health departments can present some challenges, particularly since institutions often operate under different administrative processes, timelines, and reporting requirements. Coordinating internship placements, supervision, onboarding, liability agreements, and student compensation can create significant logistical burdens for both academic institutions and host agencies. Strengthening administrative contact and establishing clear points of contact in addition to developing standardized internship agreements and processes can help reduce these barriers and support more sustainable workforce development pathways.

Students enrolled in EHAC-accredited degree programs can also encounter barriers that limit their ability to complete the internship requirement. Financial constraints, transportation challenges, housing costs, and the need to balance work and family responsibilities can make it difficult for students to participate in geographically distant internships. Expanding paid internship opportunities, offering flexible or hybrid placement models, and strengthening partnerships with local health departments and community organizations can help reduce these barriers, improve equitable access to internship experiences, and support timely degree completion.

A Call to Action

Environmental health workforce shortages continue to challenge the capacity of public health systems nationwide. Addressing these shortages requires sustained investment in workforce development and expanded opportunities for experiential learning that prepare students for careers in environmental public health. Collaborations among EHAC-accredited degree programs, NEHA via NEPHIP, local health departments, state agencies, and community partners offer a scalable and sustainable approach to strengthening the environmental public health workforce pathway. By expanding internship opportunities, reducing barriers to participation for students and preceptors, and building strong academic-practice partnerships, these efforts contribute to preparing the next generation of environmental public health professionals, meeting emerging public health challenges, expanding the

environmental public health workforce, and ensuring its sustainability. ✨

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