Value of Environmental Health

Of the ten great public health achievements of the 20th century, at least four – safer workplaces, control of infectious diseases, safer and healthier foods, and the fluoridation of drinking water – were the result of environmental health policies and interventions. Environmental health serves as one of the most basic forms of public health prevention. Traditional environmental health activities, such as food and public water supply protection and environmental monitoring, are currently performed in more than 75% of state environmental health programs. Other important activities, such as childhood lead poisoning prevention, environmental health risk assessment and recreational water protection are also carried out in a large majority of state environmental health programs. In addition to the more traditional environmental health programs, 56% of State Environmental Health Directors (SEHD) in 2010 reported having responsibility for new environmental health activities, many in response to legislative mandates. New activities include smoking-ban enforcement, harmful algal bloom surveillance, and occupational health surveillance, to name a few. With the emergence of new issues and additional programs, the responsibilities of state environmental health professionals are increasing while the environmental health workforce is shrinking.

Background to the State Environmental Health Directors

The SEHD are organized as an informal peer group within ASTHO and receive staff support and connectivity with state and territorial health officials. In 2006, ASTHO administered a survey to the SEHD group in order to develop a snapshot of state environmental health services. The 2006 survey was reviewed, enhanced and re-administered to the SEHD group in June 2010. The survey generated a total of 48 respondents (47 states and one territory). States were asked to provide information about 17 environmental health programs, funding sources, workforce, emerging issues and relevant legislative developments.

Funding Sources

- A majority of state EH programs (62%) receive federal funding for lead prevention and control programs.
- While over 90% of state EH programs reported doing at least one indoor air quality activity, only 15% receive federal funding for indoor air quality programs.
- Less than 50% of state EH programs receive money for emergency preparedness and responses activities, even though 82% of respondents said they had been involved in an emergency response event in the past year.

Environmental health program funding from CDC, EPA, or other federal agencies

EPR = Emergency Preparedness and Response
Program and Workforce
Environmental health workforce development is a priority issue for SEHDs. Considerable time and resources are needed for new environmental health professionals to become prepared for their professional responsibilities. It has been estimated that approximately $45,000 is spent training each new environmental health specialist.\(^1\) Therefore, retaining experienced and qualified environmental health staff represents an opportunity for cost savings for health departments. However, in the past three years:

- 67% of states had to lay off staff or decrease full time employee responsibilities within their environmental health program because of budget cuts.

- Due to budget cuts, 29% of states eliminated one or more entire program within the environmental health unit, while 63% reduced environmental health services.

- 50% of states reported that they have had to reduce staff professional expertise due to budget cuts.

- Over 70% of states reported that their staff has not been able to attend trainings for professional development or enhancement.

While staff professional qualifications for hiring remain constant in a majority of states, professional expertise has been lost through forced early retirement and the inability to fill vacancies due to hiring freezes. With continued cuts to funding and staff, state environmental health programs will find it increasingly difficult to maintain effective programs that ensure the health and safety of communities across the U.S. State environmental health programs also serve an integral role in the public health response to emergency events. With further cuts to the environmental health workforce, communities could become more vulnerable to the dangers and consequences of emergency situations.\(^2\)

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