ASTHO’s State Environmental Health Directors Group

Background

The State Environmental Health Directors (SEHD) are an organized peer group within the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) whose membership includes environmental health leadership from the U.S. state and territorial (S/T) health agencies, and the District of Columbia. Originally convened in 2005, the SEHD group strives to advance the practice of environmental public health with the following goals:

- To develop a national identity and unified voice for state environmental public health practice;
- To enhance relationships and communication among states and partners; and
- To provide a forum for discussing key and emerging environmental health.

ASTHO helps the SEHD group achieve these goals by providing opportunities for state environmental health leaders to network, share best practices, and collectively solve common problems.

Membership and Organization

The SEHD group is comprised of the management officials in each S/T health agency who direct and oversee environmental health programs, such as food safety and sanitation, air and water quality, recreational sanitation and safety, waste management, toxicology, environmental epidemiology, and surveillance.

The SEHD group is governed by a steering committee of ten volunteers from each of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services regions. The steering committee sets the strategic direction and agenda for the SEHD group. Smaller workgroups help carry out the SEHD group’s agenda and establish priority areas.

The SEHD group meets monthly by conference calls, and annually in person.

Monthly Conference Calls: The monthly conference calls provide a forum to discuss recent events, new research, best practices, and other issues. The monthly conference calls cover hot topics, workgroup updates, and regional activities. Federal counterparts, public health partners, and other colleagues are invited to exchange information with S/T health agencies. In addition, the steering committee meets monthly via conference call to discuss timely issues and prepare for the next full SEHD group call.

SEHD Annual Meeting: The SEHD annual meeting helps build capacity and partnerships for environmental health programs in the states and territories, helps increase knowledge of current environmental health issues, and allows participants to share tools and resources. The meeting includes discussion of SEHD workgroup activities, emerging public health issues in the states and territories, and future priorities for the group. In addition, the meeting includes sessions on ongoing environmental public health topics including CDC’s Environmental Public Health Tracking program, climate and health, health impact assessments, budget and workforce challenges, chemical safety and exposure issues, and partner updates.
SEHD Priority Issues

- **Safe Food and Water**: Recent outbreaks in the food supply, food inspection training needs, laboratory capacity and surveillance shortages, contaminants in drinking water, source water protection, the safety of recreational water, and issues surrounding water treatments are among the challenges S/T health agencies face. S/T health agencies must remain vigilant in protecting and assuring the safety of food and water.

- **Healthy Communities**: S/T health agencies see the development of healthy communities as an integral component in addressing many public health issues including obesity, asthma and other respiratory conditions, water-borne disease outbreaks, mental health concerns, safety, and injuries. Health Impact Assessments and Health in All Policies have been identified as promising ways to promote healthy communities.

- **Climate and Health**: Climate change can result in many public health consequences, including an increase in water and vector-borne diseases, drought, floods, wild fires, coastline loss, crop loss, and natural disasters. In an effort to address these concerns, many health agencies are creating climate adaption plans to help them better prepare for and respond to these events.

- **Environmental Health Workforce**: Ongoing economic pressure on governmental health agencies, combined with shortages in qualified professionals in the market, are providing significant challenges for S/T health agencies to optimally perform their environmental health responsibilities. Decision-makers and the public often lack an understanding of the work and field of environmental health, so there is a need to develop consistent messages and communication strategies.

- **Chemical Exposures**: State and federal efforts to modernize the approach taken to protecting the public from hazardous chemical exposures, including lead, radon, and other toxics, are underway. Possible health impacts related to hydraulic fracturing are an emerging concern for this group.

**Active Workgroups**

- **Safe Water**: The safe water workgroup (SWWG) is convened quarterly to address and improve the capacity of S/T health agencies to prevent and respond to adverse human health effects related to water. In the past, the SWWG has been engaged in the implementation of the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act, development of the CDC Model Aquatic Health Code, health and drinking water concerns related to hydraulic fracturing (aka fracking), nutrient pollution, and EPA’s Drinking Water Strategy. Other initiatives include engaging with EPA on water security, source water protection, and onsite wastewater management.
  - In 2012, the SWWG prioritized three topic areas: private wells, harmful algal blooms (HABs), and fracking. The SWWG also contributed to ASTHO’s [Drinking Water Position Statement](#).
In 2013, the SWWG has focused on developing and sharing messages around HABs, nutrient pollution, and drought. The SWWG also contributed to the renewal of ASTHO’s Position Statement on Pharmaceuticals and Personal Care Products in Water approved by the ASTHO Board in June 2013.

**Indoor Environments/Healthy Housing:** The indoor environmental quality (IEQ) workgroup seeks to address and improve the capacity of state-based public health in addressing indoor environment and healthy housing issues. The workgroup provides a forum for prioritizing current and emerging environmental public health concerns related to indoor air quality, integrated pest management, lead, radon, and other healthy housing issues. The IEQ workgroup also aims to address the scarcity of tools for measuring indoor environmental quality and the enforcement of healthy housing regulations.

- In 2011, the IEQ workgroup drafted and disseminated a multi-state IEQ surveillance tool to capture the work that occurs in state indoor environment programs.
- In 2012, ASTHO created a summary of the data on the frequency and types of calls received by 15 state health departments on IEQ issues.
- In 2013, the IEQ workgroup is seeking to address the issues raised from the analysis, including what is needed to help S/T health agencies better respond to their communities’ IEQ needs.

**Information Technology Infrastructure:** The information technology (IT) workgroup focuses on environmental health surveillance programs. The workgroup discusses how various surveillance programs can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of their programs, as well as a means to quantify the public health benefits from environmental public health activities. The workgroup collects information on existing IT infrastructure in S/T health agencies and identifies areas for collaboration and improvement.

- In 2011, the IT workgroup administered a survey of SEHDs to better understand the current status of information systems used to manage state environmental health programs, challenges with data sharing, and areas of need. The “2011 State Environmental Health Director IT Infrastructure Survey Results Report” can be found on ASTHO’s website.
- In November 2012, the IT workgroup met with CDC to follow-up on the NVEAIS/NORS data systems and EH data standardization issues discussed at the SEHD annual meeting in Philadelphia.
- In 2013, the IT workgroup has focused on data standardization and exploring environmental health in the current national health information initiative, including the meaningful use of EH data.

**Workforce Development (Ad-Hoc):** The workforce workgroup identified the need for an electronic resource kit to aid S/T health agency staff with recruitment and retention of staff, training materials, and communication/marketing efforts. The workgroup also initiated conversation with the National Environmental Health Association to discuss ways to partner to address environmental health workforce challenges. The workgroup convenes on an ad-hoc basis. Issues of interest to the workforce workgroup include forging new relationships with national partners, strengthening relationships local health departments and other state agencies in an effort to leverage resources, and developing strategies to address workforce shortages due to declining budgets.
• **Toxicology (Ad-Hoc):** The toxicology workgroup is composed of representatives from S/T health agencies that have backgrounds in toxicology, risk assessment, and environmental epidemiology. The workgroup convenes on an ad-hoc basis when important technical assistance on a toxicology issue is needed or to weigh in on a chemical-related policy issue. Issues discussed in the past include the National Conversation on Public Health and Chemical Exposures, health concerns related to hydraulic fracturing, and state chemical legislation.

**Partnerships and Collaboration**

The SEHD group offers an important opportunity for a dialogue of priorities, issues, and best practices between the states and federal agency staff including those from CDC, FDA, NIEHS, and EPA. The SEHD group also frequently engages with ASTHO’s public health NGO partners, including the American Public Health Association, Association of Public Health Laboratories, Association of State Drinking Water Administrators, National Association of County and City Health Officials, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Center for Healthy Housing, National Environmental Health Association, and the Environmental Council of the States. Additionally, ASTHO regularly provides opportunities for the SEHD group to work with their counterparts in other state cabinet-level agencies, such as chronic disease, public safety, preparedness, agriculture, and transportation, to integrate public health across these disciplines.