

ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH: Everyone. Everywhere. Every Day.

"The emergence of many new issues and threats... Cryptosporidium in drinking water, hantavirus, Escherichia coli, West Nile virus, and most recently homeland terrorism... points to the need for a well prepared environmental public health system." Source: CDC 2003

meeting
needs in:

Alabama

Alabama is a small, beautiful, rural state. Forty-seven percent of Alabamians live in rural areas. Urban areas of Alabama include Birmingham, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa. The state's economy, which historically relied heavily on agricultural and steel production (Birmingham), has diversified into other services such as health care and high technology.

Environmental public health problems in Alabama are associated with limited resources and services. Alabama has one of the lowest median family incomes in the U.S., ranking 44th of all states. Source: Alabama Tourism, 2004; Urban Institute 1998 and 2004

CRITICAL ISSUES

DETERIORATING WATER QUALITY

Inadequate and failing septic tanks may be the biggest polluters of surface and groundwater in Alabama.

The 47 percent of Alabamians who live in rural or semi-rural areas depend on septic tanks for domestic waste disposal. Up to 25 percent of these systems are failing and residents cannot afford to fix them. Raw sewage from these systems is leaking into waterways.

Source: USGS 2001; Alabama Cooperative Extension System 2004

RISK OF FOOD POISONING

Foodborne illnesses continue to sicken about 76 million Americans, hospitalize 325,000 and kill 5,000 per year.

At a time when there should be an increase in food control measures, the number of restaurant inspections required in Alabama has decreased to three per year (because of budget constraints).

Source: Alabama Department of Public Health 2004; CDC A National Strategy to Revitalize Environmental Public Health Services 2003

INADEQUATE COMMUNITY EDUCATION

There is a general lack of awareness or knowledge about environmental public health issues within the community. Very few communities are provided with education or training on the environmental public health issues they face.

GREATEST CHALLENGES

FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

Five state agencies are responsible for environmental public health services in Alabama.

ILL-PREPARED WORK FORCE

There is concern that the environmental public health work force is not adequately trained to handle today's new and emerging issues, including bioterrorism and emergency response.

STRETCHED RESOURCES

There are not enough environmental public health practitioners in the state.

MODEL PROGRAMS

POSITIVE IMPACT OF EDUCATION

When high bacteria counts were consistently found in the local reservoir, Tuscaloosa County environmental public health workers educated the public and local government about the issue—resulting in raised awareness and concern.

FORMING PARTNERSHIPS

Alabama Clean Water Partnerships is a coalition of public agencies, industries and the public. Through this program, homeowners have become educated about septic tank maintenance and have been provided with discount vouchers for maintenance.

Community Profile



Charity Richey-Bentley
Executive Director,
The West Anniston
Foundation
Anniston, Alabama

"Environmental public health issues are successfully managed only when the community and the local health department are engaged."

Charity Richey-Bentley is the executive director of the West Anniston Foundation (WAF), a community-based organization that works to revitalize and sustain the West Anniston community, following the Monsanto PCB area contamination and lawsuits. WAF promotes and supports the health and education of the economically and socially disadvantaged residents and former residents of West Anniston. In West Anniston there is a cloud of fear regarding environmental public health issues, especially PCB exposure. The Foundation works closely with the local health department and residents in assessing and addressing all environmental public health issues within the community.

CHALLENGES

Fragmented System

Five agencies are responsible for environmental public health services in Alabama. These agencies are often insular and focus on their mandates. There is a lack of coordination of environmental public health services across agencies, resulting in wasteful administrative costs, a duplication of efforts and in some cases omission of services.

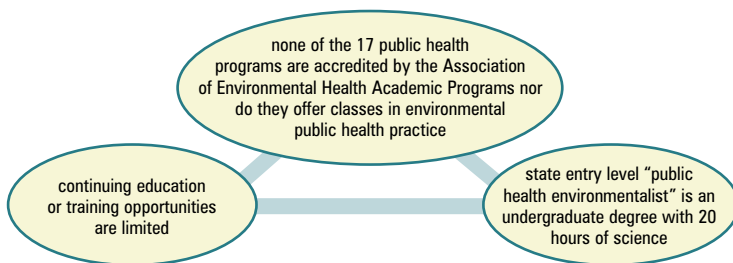
AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PUBLIC HEALTH PROGRAMS



Ill-Prepared Work Force

The environmental public health work force is not adequately prepared or trained in environmental public health practices or how to work within communities.

Source: State of Alabama Career Guide 2004



Stretched Resources

There are not enough environmental public health professionals employed in Alabama. In a recent study, it was reported that an eight-county health department needed 38 percent more staff to meet mandated responsibilities (e.g., number of inspections).

- + There is difficulty attracting and retaining young professionals to environmental public health service because of low pay compared to the private sector.

Source: Association of State and Territorial Health Officials 2004

PUBLIC HEALTH ENVIRONMENTALIST: THE FACTS

number employed: 223*
 number needed: an additional 75
 entry-level salary: \$26,410

TYPICAL RESPONSIBILITIES**

Air quality	Safe waterways
Community environmental assessment	Private wells
Food safety	Pool inspections
Healthy homes	Tattoo/tanning inspections
Pollution prevention	Vector control
Public drinking water	Emergency preparedness and response
Solid waste management	
Onsite sewage disposal	

* excluding Mobile and Jefferson County

**In some cases, the environmental public health worker may be independently responsible for environmental public health services within an entire county.

Source: Alabama Department of Public Health 2004

CDC FUNDED PROGRAMS

Developing Communities of Excellence in the Deep South.

University of Alabama School of Public Health (UAB SPH) Department of Environmental Health Sciences was awarded a grant from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Environmental Health (CDC, NCEH) to establish a Deep South Center of Excellence. The Center established training programs and conducted community-based research on environmental interventions in rural settings.

Southeast Regional Environmental Public Health Academic Center.

UAB SPH Department of Environmental Health Science has received funding from CDC, NCEH for a Southeast Regional Environmental Public Health Academic Center that will partner with state and territorial health departments in 10 Southeastern states, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.

PACE EH. Eleven communities in Alabama, including West Anniston, conducted PACE EH (Protocol for Assessing Communities of Excellence in Environmental Health). PACE EH is a program of the National Association of City and County Health Officials (with funding from CDC) and a model that involves the community in environmental public health assessment and planning. PACE EH resulted in a broader level of community involvement in environmental public health activities such as West Nile virus bird testing, lead poisoning prevention and safe drinking water.

Support Environmental Public Health Services

Environmental public health practitioners are responsible for protecting and preventing public exposure to harmful agents. Protection of the public's health comes through the many services they provide, including monitoring air quality, safe drinking water and food safety, integrated pest management (e.g., West Nile virus), toxic chemical control, disaster planning and control (terrorism) and public education. State and local environmental public health programs are typically underfunded and stretched beyond capacity. Environmental public health practitioners are often not sufficiently trained or supported to handle the emerging and complex environmental public health issues they face every day. Programs lack infrastructure to manage these issues, and research is needed. There is a need to continue and *increase* the federal funding that is so critical to these programs. Without this support, the environmental public health systems may not be able to fulfill their responsibilities, resulting in an increased risk to the public's health. CDC, NCEH, Environmental Health Services Branch is spearheading an effort to revitalize environmental public health services. For more information on this program, visit www.cdc.gov/nceh/ehs, or call APHA's Director of Government Relations and Affiliate Affairs at (202) 777-2541.



American Public Health Association

800 I Street, NW
 Washington, DC 20001

(202) 777-2742
 fax: (202) 777-2534
 e-mail: ephs@apha.org