



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF SANITARIANS, INC.

Prestigious Recognition for Environmental Health Professionals

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

June 8, 2021

Re: Support of the Environmental Health Workforce Act H.R. 2661

Dear House Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Majority Leader Schumer, Minority Leader McConnell,

The undersigned public and environmental health organizations urge you to support the passage of the Environmental Health Workforce Act H.R. 2661, sponsored by Representative Brenda Lawrence (MI-14).

This act seeks to:

- Set model standards and guidelines for credentialing environmental health workers.
- Establish an environmental health workforce development plan.
- Create a report to Congress on the best practices regarding environmental health credentialing by studying the practices in six states.
- Provide loan forgiveness for environmental health workers who are accredited, certified, or licensed under applicable law.

The environmental health profession, made up of public health workers who investigate and assess hazardous environmental agents and develop, promote, and enforce guidelines, policies, and interventions to control such hazards, has seen a significant decrease in workforce capacity since 2008.

Environmental health refers to the air you breathe, the water you drink, and the food you eat. The environmental health workforce is made up of professionals who ensure the public is not harmed from environmental health threats. This public health workforce, second in size only to nursing, is facing challenges to maintain sufficient staff to perform these services.

Since 2008, 22% of the state and local environmental health jobs have been lost (National Association of County and City Health Officials, 2019). Insufficient staffing has been reported in 64% of state environmental health programs, 60% of local programs, and 67% of tribal programs mainly due to the strain the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the profession (National Environmental Health Association [NEHA], 2019). Workers express concern regarding insufficient access to training and the high level of burnout. This trend will be exacerbated with the oncoming retirement of the Baby Boom generation.

Funding for environmental health workforce training and retention has decreased. Local health department budgets have either stagnated or decreased in 2019, with over one half of local health departments experiencing a reduction. As this nation faces the largest pandemic in history, the local public health workforce is strained, with essential environmental health services being neglected as resources are being redirected to the pandemic response.

Environmental health is found within health departments of all different sizes. Even the smallest health department has an environmental health workforce. Overall, 12% of the local health department workforce is environmental health.

At present, only 27 states require a credential for environmental health workers, which is an impartial, third-party endorsement of a persons' knowledge and skill. The education and training of existing and new environmental health professionals should be a national public health goal. These impacts on the environmental health workforce is occurring in light of the proposed Infrastructure bills proposed by the Biden Administration. The laudable goal is to increase job opportunities for Americans, but at a time when the nation is lacking a sufficient number of trained and certified environmental health workers. Such professionals are needed to rebuild drinking water systems; build, renovate, and retrofit housing; and rebuild the transportation network to improve air quality and limit greenhouse gas emissions. Many of the efforts in the proposed bills will be waylaid or incomplete without an adequate and skilled environmental health workforce.

The environmental health workforce is actively engaged in COVID-19 response and recovery, especially the workforce in small, local health agencies (NEHA, 2020). In addition to their customary environmental health responsibilities, environmental health workers have been tasked with new roles and responsibilities that place them at risk of becoming infected with COVID-19. The foremost concern regarding the COVID-19 response has been having enough people to perform necessary services in light of current staffing shortages.

Through the enactment of the Environmental Health Workforce Act (H.R. 2661), this nation can ensure that its environmental health workforce is trained, credentialed, and ready to handle the environmental threats impacting public health.

Sincerely,

Brian Collins

Brian Collins, Chair
American Academy of Sanitarians

National Association of County and City Health Officials. (2019). *National profile of local health departments*. <https://www.naccho.org/resources/lhd-research/national-profile-of-local-health-departments>

National Environmental Health Association. (2020). *COVID-19 environmental health workforce needs assessment II report*. <https://emergency-neha.org/covid19/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COVID-19-EH-Workforce-Needs-Assessment-II-Report.pdf>

American Academy of Sanitarians
Nondiscrimination Policy

The American Academy of Sanitarians (Academy) accepts members of any race, color, national and ethnic origin to all the rights, privileges, programs, and activities generally accorded or made to members of the Academy. The American Academy of Sanitarians does not discriminate based on race, color, national and ethnic origin in the administration of its policies, Board of Directors membership, general membership, scholarship, or other programs.