



## National Environmental Health Association

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### Racism Undermines Environmental Health Gains

Recent and historic displays of police brutality against African Americans have laid bare the public health threats of racism. The National Environmental Health Association and its partners affirm that Black Lives Matter. As such, we condemn violence against people of color by authorities and others along with the systems that perpetuate racism and its pervasive public health consequences.

Our country has been traumatized by a recent series of traumatic environmental events. Hurricanes. Floods. Fires. Droughts. Zika. Lyme. COVID. And now the grim, painful specter of racial inequalities that have haunted American society since its inception. “Over the last two weeks I have listened to our African American/Black staff, board members, partners, members, retirees, and affiliate presidents”, said Dr. David Dyjack, NEHA Executive Director. “In their own words each has expressed: *I am not okay*”.

Environmental health strives to ensure that communities have healthy air to breathe. Yet, the last words of George Floyd were, “I can’t breathe.” Our best efforts to ensure healthy environments for all mean little when all people do not get to experience these advancements. Racism threatens public health through differences in access to and quality of healthcare and can be found at the center of poverty and limited employment opportunities, poor investment in education, and adverse environmental exposures. Environmental racism systemically fosters inequities through processes and policies that perpetuate disproportionate exposure to hazards. As such, advocating for a health equity approach to address environmental justice issues in communities of color could provide a method to address the distribution of environmental burdens impacting those communities.

Key services provided by environmental health professionals are undermined by racism. In fact, still today, the most profound predictor of the location of hazardous facilities is race. This year, we celebrate 50 years of the Clean Air Act, which has significantly improved air quality, and thereby health across, the nation. However, these gains have not been universal. Communities of color continue to experience higher levels of air

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pollution exposure and related health disparities. Similarly, in celebrating considerable health gains resulting from 50 years of the Clean Water Act, infrastructure challenges have caused widespread exposure to lead-contaminated drinking water in heavily minority-populated communities, including Flint, MI, Washington, DC, Baltimore, MD, and Newark, NJ among other places across the nation. In addition, environmental health gains in food safety have ushered protection from infectious diseases, yet food deserts persist in communities of color, contributing to challenges in accessing healthy, fresh foods and heightening risk of foodborne illness and chronic disease.

Our collective associations commit to explore systemic factors that adversely affect the delivery of environmental health services to our most vulnerable populations. We acknowledge that there is opportunity to grow diversity in the environmental health workforce, the UNCOVER EH Research Initiative demonstrates that 86 percent of the environmental health workforce is white. We encourage environmental health agencies to recruit and retain more people of color in this great field that strives to ensure healthful environments for *all*. Lastly, we call on members of the environmental health workforce to give voice to power – recalling guidance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” Black Lives Matter, and we stand in solidarity calling for justice against racism that will benefit communities and advance public and environmental health.

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