As Yogi Berra once said “It’s déjà vu all over again.” For the last 10 years, perhaps longer, I have been privileged to participate in national conversations about the impending public health workforce crisis. The storyline approximates something to the effect that the baby boom generation is about to depart the public health workforce en masse, leaving a crippled and feckless public health infrastructure behind. A recent study conducted by the de Beaumont Foundation in partnership the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) has fueled another wave of concern about impending retirements and fleeing intellectual capital from the governmental workforce. Their study methodologies are sound and both are blue-chip organizations. The original study can be found at http://journals.lww.com/jphmp/toc/2015/11001. I encourage you to read the entire supplement.

To muddle this issue, note that the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) has conducted similar surveys and has not found the same kind of alarming data at the local level. A 2014 article published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine suggested that retirement rates and other departures have been pretty steady at about 10%. About one-third of that is retirees (Newman, Ye, & Leep, 2014).

A closer examination of the data provided in the workforce turnover infographic (Figure 1) is instructive. The U.S. population in 1980 was roughly 226 million and today it has grown to around 325 million. Over the same interval the public health workforce was reduced from 220,000 to its present-day estimate of about 160,000. Using these figures, and rounding to the nearest zero, the data suggests the workforce ratio in 1980 was one public health worker per 1,000 population.
tion and today it is around 1:2,000. What does that mean? I’m not sure, and of course there are many ways to interpret this data. How about environmental health?

Speaking to our profession, the number of individuals working in environmental health is evidently a little more complicated to estimate as described by my friend Mehran Massoudi and two others in an article published in the JEH in 2012 (Massoudi, Blake, & Marcum, 2012). The conversation around enumerating the environmental health workforce immediately enters a rabbit hole when one crosses into the abyss of the “environmental health professional vs. professional working in environmental health.” So I am going to steer clear of that and suggest there are about 20,000 of us in the U.S. working in the profession.

So, if the de Beaumont Foundation data is correct, and let’s accept it at face value, the $64,000 question is, Is there an impending environmental health workforce crisis as well? I am going to dodge the empirical question about numbers, and leave that for a later column. I do want to address some issues that may be affecting the environmental health workforce and in the process suggest that we are masters of our own destiny.

The first issue I’d like to address is one of workforce retention, and direct your attention to the second infographic (Figure 2). If you study it carefully, you’ll note leaders within the profession can control many of things that make the workplace a reasonably pleasurable and rewarding place to be, including making entry into the workforce easier. That is the effect of quality supervisory and organizational support. I know from my time in academia that many young people opted not to work for the local health department not because they didn’t want to, but because they simply could not afford to wait for the extended time periods that often accompany county and city human resource processes to be completed. In some cases it took months to fill an entry-level position. In this day and age of managing life in nanoseconds, governmental human resource processes can and must change with the times.

The de Beaumont study also suggests that the workforce exodus is not simply among retirees. The study confirms what I already knew. In fact, this development has been underway for quite a while. During my time at NACCHO, board members communicated that they readily accepted that employees would work for them for a few years, leave to explore other opportunities, then return when the time was right. This is probably the new normal.

I have articulated in other columns that we don’t have an environmental health crisis, we have a crisis in leadership and management, and that too is in our control. Employees desire to work in environments where they are engaged, empowered, and enabled. Not only does this make sense, it is an operational imperative. We want our teams to grow professionally as we groom the next generation and construct succession plans. People, we are what we leave behind.

I also take issue with the perception that there is insufficient talent to carry the mantle of our profession into the future. As I understand it, public health is the ninth most popular undergraduate degree in the U.S. A very common question I receive from young people is centered on employment opportunities and entry into the job market. We don’t have a talent bandwidth issue; there are plenty of qualified young people. The white elephant in the room is compensation relative to student loan debt, which is currently a subject du jour among presidential hopefuls. Again, this requires inspired leadership.

Now then, I have buried this paragraph deep in this editorial for a reason. It is painful, but needs to be said. For those of you nearing retirement, thank you for all you have accomplished; today we stand on your shoulders. At the same time I have observed a troubling national trend characterized by retirees who return to the system as double dippers or consultants, impeding the upward trajectory for the new generation of envi-
Students Encouraged to Apply for Environmental Health Internships

NEHA, in collaboration with the Association of Environmental Health Academic Programs, is accepting applications for the National Environmental Public Health Internship Program (NEPHP). NEHA will accept up to 30 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)–sponsored environmental health internships for summer 2016. Students from National Environmental Health Science and Protection Accreditation Council–accredited undergraduate and graduate programs are eligible to apply for an 8 to 10 week internship at local, state, or tribal environmental health departments across the country.

NEHA will award students a stipend of up to $4,000 dollars ($400 per week) for completing the internship. An additional stipend is available to cover the costs of relocating for the internship. Students interested in applying to NEPHP should submit an application at www.neha.org/professional-development/students/internship by February 15, 2016.

Last year was the first time these CDC-supported internships in environmental health were offered, and 12 interns were placed in health departments across the U.S. These interns were involved in a wide range of activities such as studying contamination levels of surface water and groundwater, building on tracking initiatives by presenting pesticide exposures and illness information, and completing asset mapping in regards to sustainable environments in communities. To learn more about past student internship experiences, visit www.neha.org/professional-development/students/internship/2015-student-success-stories.

Unique Vectors and Public Health Pests Opportunity

Through a partnership with CDC’s National Center for Environmental Health, NEHA is pleased to announce its first-ever virtual conference, Enhancing Environmental Health Knowledge (EEK): Vectors and Public Health Pests, on April 13–14, 2016. The goal of this virtual conference is to enhance the knowledge of environmental health professionals on vectors and public health pests in order to help them better prepare to respond to environmental events of public health concern. Conference content will include topics such as:

- rodents, ticks, mosquitoes, and bed bugs;
- institutional integrated pest management;
- emerging vectors and vectorborne diseases;
- new technologies in vector and pest control;
- climate change and vectors;
- lessons learned;
- inspection successes;
- stories from the field and others.

This virtual conference is a unique opportunity to help advance and interact with environmental health professionals around topics and issues in vectors and public health pests in a new and exciting virtual environment. You can attend EEK: Vectors and Public Health Pests from anywhere using your tablet or laptop.

For more information about the conference or to submit an abstract to present, please visit www.neha.org/vectors-pests-conference.

2016 HUD Secretary’s Awards for Healthy Homes

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in partnership with NEHA, announces the second annual Secretary’s Awards for Healthy Homes. These awards will recognize excellence in healthy housing innovation and achievement in three categories:

- Public Housing/Multifamily Supported Housing, Policy and Research Innovation, and Cross Program Coordination among Health, Environment, and Housing. The activities or policies nominated must show measurable benefits in the health of residents and be available to low- and/or moderate-income families. Applications will be open January 15 on NEHA’s and HUD’s Web sites and are due no later than 11:59:59 p.m. PST, February 29. Previous award winners are ineligible to apply. The awards will be presented at the NEHA 2016 Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition and HUD Healthy Homes Conference (www.neha.org/aec), June 13–16, in San Antonio, Texas.

References


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