BUILDING BETTER HEALTH

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The environmental health team within the American Public Health Association is striving to bridge the knowledge gap between the environment and human health. Senior Program Manager, Surili Sutaria Patel, highlights the Association’s efforts to raise awareness among policy makers and the public of the environment’s current and future impact on health and the need for improved health protection.

Can you outline the core goals of the environmental health team at the American Public Health Association (APHA)?

The central mission of the team is to draw attention to the connection between healthy communities and healthy people. We use science-based policies to focus on priority environmental health issues including climate change and health, chemical exposure and prevention, built environment, and food safety and nutrition. We also bring to light the needs of underserved communities and vulnerable populations, and advocate for health to be included in all policies.

As Senior Program Manager, what are your key duties and responsibilities within the team?

I oversee APHA’s environmental health activities and priorities, including climate change, transportation and health, food systems, and workforce development. I am responsible for environmental health budgets, grant management and programme development. I serve as the primary liaison to APHA’s Environment Section, a group of our members who work in the field, as well as to various partner organisations. My role also provides me with the opportunity to work closely with APHA colleagues in government relations and public affairs to advance the APHA legislative and regulatory environmental health agenda, and develop products and materials as needed.

Housed within APHA’s Center for Public Health Policy, how does the environmental health team endeavour to shape environmental health and protection policies within the US?

The team works very closely with the government relations team at APHA to promote timely environmental health concerns, inform policy makers and highlight the latest research on environmental health issues. In addition, with the help of the membership-led Governing Council, APHA has set out policy statements that reflect the Association’s position on these issues.

What are the primary issues that arise from harmful chemical exposure in the US, and how is APHA striving to overcome these problems?

Many communities across the US are faced with potential harmful chemical exposures. APHA has partnered with the US Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to inform the public health community on the resources ATSDR has to offer communities and various vulnerable populations at risk of contact with hazardous compounds found in their food, air and water. APHA also works to improve health and prevent harmful chemical exposures through its partnership with the National Conversation, a collaborative initiative to create an agenda for the safe and healthy use of chemicals.

The third National Climate Assessment released in May 2014 confirmed the evident correlation between climate change and public health. How is global warming impacting the nation’s health, and what action needs to be taken to tackle this growing threat?

While climate change is a global crisis, many serious impacts will be felt across the US and will be especially significant in specific regions – creating varying public health challenges in different parts of the country.

In the northeast, rising temperature may worsen symptoms for people with allergies, while more extreme temperatures could lead to increased heat stress and heatstroke, particularly among the poor and elderly. In the southwest, rising temperatures and decreased rainfall are putting a strain on already limited water sources, increasing wildfires and air pollution. In Alaska – which has warmed twice as fast as the rest of the nation according to the National Climate Assessment – there are widespread impacts. Loss of snow pack and retreating sea ice is changing the lives of native people and leading to drier landscapes with greater wildfire risk.

To tackle the issues surrounding climate change, APHA is working to raise awareness of the intersection between climate change and health impacts and advocating for better policies that protect and promote good health.
What is the FrameWorks Institute and how has APHA’s partnership activities with it helped improve communications between environmental health professionals and the public?

The FrameWorks Institute is an independent non-profit organisation that designs, conducts and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary communications research to empirically identify the most effective ways of reframing social and scientific topics.

Over the past three years, the FrameWorks Institute has developed messaging frames, and will now deploy training tools for use by public health professionals to better explain the role of environmental health to the public. The Institute will also be working with APHA and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to advance climate change as a public health issue. Through its work, APHA aims to increase awareness and knowledge among leaders and decision makers about the need for climate change adaptation and preparedness in protecting communities across the country, and to build public health systems’ capacities to address these needs.

What is the National Tribal Environmental Health Think Tank (NTEH)?

It was established in 2011, and comprises 14 individuals with diverse backgrounds and experience in the tribal environmental public health field. Their aim is to bring visibility to issues tribes face and develop direction for more effective engagement.

The Think Tank is supported by the Office of Tribal Affairs, which sits in the National Center for Environmental Health at CDC. This office is responsible for implementing Executive Order 13175, which promotes tribal sovereignty.

APHA works with the Office of Tribal Affairs and the NTEH Think Tank to establish and maintain diverse partnerships for cooperation and promotion of evidence-based strategies and interventions; strengthen the partnership of the Think Tank; and improve quality, availability and accessibility of public health education materials, training and evaluation tools and resources.

Can you briefly outline the environmental health team’s most significant achievements? Are there any upcoming projects that you are particularly excited about?

The environmental health team is proud to have produced a wealth of significant products. The team gets support from partners and funders at the National Center for Environmental Health, as well as APHA’s very hardworking membership. The quality products the team puts out provide a great platform for being the leading voice in environmental public health.

In 2015, we will be hosting a webinar series highlighting the significant contributions to environmental health by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. We will also be developing environment and climate change messaging frames.

Tracking the trends

To encourage the integration of health and environment data, APHA supports the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)’s National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program. Through a dynamic and interactive online portal, the Tracking Network, healthcare professionals and the wider public are given access to integrated data on health and the environment at local, state and national levels. To improve accessibility, the programme provides maps, charts and tables of data along with tools that can be used to help communicate environmental health issues to a wider audience.

APHA strives to increase awareness of CDC’s National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program among public health professionals and policy makers, while promoting the facilities of the Tracking Network to advance evidence-based strategies for improving public health.

Visit CDC’s National Environmental Public Health Tracking Program here: http://ephtracking.cdc.gov/showHome.action
Chemical exposure and prevention

Every day, Americans are exposed to thousands of different chemicals through the food they eat, water they drink, air they breathe and products they buy. However, many are oblivious to the extent of this exposure and the potential harm these chemicals could cause.

To combat this, APHA is committed to helping projects that focus on: tracking and surveillance of exposure-related health effects, increasing knowledge of the relation between chemical exposure and health issues, improving public understanding, and advocating to reduce future exposures.

Built environment

APHA defines the built environment as the human-made features of our communities. The way society designs and builds communities can affect people’s physical and mental health; therefore, APHA encourages designing and building communities that are healthy, in order to improve the quality of life for all people.

APHA promotes healthy community design and built environments by advancing transportation and land use decisions that consider health, safety and equity. The Association is currently working with several partners to promote a healthy community, including:

- **America Walks** – a resource fostering ‘walkable’ communities by bringing together and engaging walking advocates
- **Safe Routes to School Partnership Network** – a network of schools, businesses, professional planners, local government officials and more to improve children’s health by encouraging them to walk and cycle to and from school
- **The National Center for Healthy Housing** – a non-profit organisation committed to securing healthy homes for all through advocacy and research efforts

Climate and health

Climate change has the potential to cause serious public health issues in America, from changes in vector-borne disease and effects on drinking water and food supplies to extreme weather events and temperature changes. To highlight the need for effective climate change strategies and interventions for the protection of public health, APHA is striving to raise awareness of the serious health implications related to climate change.

The organisation is actively involved in a variety of outreach activities. APHA collaboratively hosts climate and health webinars and events. In 2011, the Association published *Climate Change: Mastering the Public Health Role*, a guidebook for public health practitioners on the challenges of climate change. Next year, APHA will be developing climate change messaging frames to enhance their communication with the public on the key issues at hand.

Food and health

In the US, each year there are an estimated 48 million cases of foodborne disease, with more than 100,000 hospitalisations due to food poisoning and approximately 3,000 deaths from illnesses associated with it. APHA supports initiatives that seek to improve access to safe and healthy food through creating a sustainable food system, increasing availability to nutritious foods and calling for greater controls and oversight to enhance food safety. These include:

- **Make Our Food Safe Coalition** – a food safety project, of which APHA is a member, that seeks to strengthen food safety law enforcement to help reduce health risks from foodborne pathogens
- **Creating a Safe Food System for America** – materials that have been developed by APHA to outline its recommendations on how to improve the food safety system
- **Towards a healthy, sustainable food system** – a position paper published by the Association that summarises the current US food and sustainability system, issues for concern and actions for opportunity