

## ► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



Adam London,  
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## An Evolving Workforce

I am a sanitarian because of the powerful influence of two amazing women: my mother and grandmother. My mother has been a registered nurse since I was very young. She is retired now, but that changes very little. She is, and always will be, a nurse. It's not merely something she did for a paycheck; it became part of the fabric of her identity. Caring for her patients, family, and everyone around her is central to who she is. This sense of vocation made a very powerful impact on me. I could see the joy of doing something that truly matters. I could also see the incredible force for good that this amazing professional woman projected onto the world around her. What higher calling could there be than serving other people? She has always inspired me to serve others.

Pursuing a career that could become a vocation was very important to me as I entered Ferris State University as a biology major. I did not really know what I wanted to be, but it needed to feed my love for science and the desire to make a difference in the world. At one point during my sophomore year, I became frustrated by the ambiguous career opportunities awaiting biology graduates. In a moment of doubt, I even considered transferring into the business school! It was my ever-wise grandmother who knocked some sense into me and said, "You need to get into that environmental health program like your uncle Bobby did!" She then proceeded—without my knowledge—to call faculty in Ferris State University's environmental health program and enlisted them to rescue me from my academic limbo. Within a week I was officially a student in the only

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accredited environmental health undergraduate program in Michigan at that time.

I will always owe a debt of gratitude to these two incredible women for steering me toward this noble profession. I know that many of you were inspired by strong women in your own lives. The environmental health profession has blessed all of us with innumerable opportunities, but it is not often an easy career path. As all of you know too well, environmental health is demanding and challenging work. It was especially difficult for me when I was a young, inexperienced sanitarian. Let's face it, a portion of the world loathes the fact that regulators even exist. I know that the young women in our profession have it harder yet. The addi-

tional challenges presented by sexism and harassment are intolerable and something we all need to recognize and reject. We have an obligation to ensure that our profession is safe for all to practice.

I am astounded by how far the demographics of our profession have changed during the past 20 years. In the late 1990s, when I finally graduated with that environmental health degree, the workforce I entered was predominately male. The membership, leadership, and attendance at state-wide environmental health associations also appeared to be disproportionately endowed with Y chromosomes. While the rest of the public health workforce contained a majority of females, environmental health divisions lagged far behind. Making matters worse, a sticky floor seemed to slow their progression into leadership roles.

Something revolutionary has happened, however, during the course of the past two decades. The majority of sanitarians now in many health departments are female. Your NEHA board of directors is probably more diverse than it has ever been, and we have been led by extraordinary women presidents during my time on the board.

Times are changing, but we cannot let this progress fool us into thinking that sexism and harassment are extinct. The many revelations of sexual harassment within the entertainment industry should startle all of us. This issue should cause us to reflect upon our own industry and understand that the objectification of people is a problem everywhere. We can, and must, always strive to do better.

I hope you have already made it a priority to mentor at least one young professional. Preventing sexism and harassment in the environmental health workforce is more likely if we build strong networks of support for one another. This month I challenge you, regardless of your age or gender, to specifically reach out to the young women in our profession. We have all been blessed by amazing women in our families and at work—it's past time to pay

it forward. Please don't assume that you know what their unique challenges are. Rather, reach out to them as colleagues and equals, and understand that they are the future standard bearers of our profession. Seek to understand and to build a culture of zero tolerance for sexism and harassment.

If environmental health is going to thrive, we need a diverse profession comprised of individuals empowered with the liberty to

reach their full potential without fear of harassment. If we can successfully build this culture, we will have truly made the sort of difference that would make our mothers and grandmothers proud. 🐼



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*Thank you.*

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