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Ebel: The Value of Environmental Health Services

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(Photo: submitted)

Environmental Health – it’s probably not what you think. As a core public health discipline, Environmental Health programs focus on preventing disease and creating environments where people can live safe and healthy lives.

The term “environmental” leads many people to think these programs focus on protecting the environment. While that is partially true, the key word is “health.” These programs are concerned with addressing the health impact of places and things that surround us, including both the natural and the built environment.

Food Safety programs are fundamental public health programs that ensure a safe food supply. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) estimates that 48 million people get sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die from foodborne diseases each year in the United States. Thorough and frequent inspections combined with food handler education can significantly reduce the risk of foodborne disease outbreaks linked to places where food is prepared and served.

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In Licking County, our Environmental Health Sanitarians conduct over 3,000 food inspections each year at Food Service Operations and Retail Food Establishments, including restaurants, grocery stores, convenience stores, schools, nursing homes, mobile units, food trucks, vending locations, and temporary operations.

Water Quality programs focus on preventing waterborne diseases which are responsible for 2 million deaths worldwide each year, with the majority occurring in children under 5 years old. In the U.S. we take safe water for granted, but that is only due to the work of Environmental Health water quality programs including wastewater treatment, drinking water regulations, and pool and beach licensing and inspections.

Zoonotic diseases spread between animals and people. Environmental Health programs are responsible for rabies control, including the investigation of all animal bites reported by healthcare providers and victims. Vector borne diseases are transmitted by ticks or mosquitoes, and include Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, Lyme Disease, West Nile Virus, Lacrosse Encephalitis, and Zika. Educating the public, identifying mosquito breeding sites, and controlling mosquito populations are important ways to reduce disease risks.

Safe housing programs including plumbing, radon testing, sanitation enforcement, and reducing lead paint exposures are keys to reducing health hazards where families, especially children, spend most of their time.

Proper solid waste disposal, including trash generated at homes and business, is one of the oldest public health challenges. Licensing landfills, waste haulers, transfer stations, and compost sites, as well as eliminating open dumping and requiring proper waste disposal, are all important ways Environmental Health programs help assure that wastes do not create conditions that cause pollution, spread disease, attract insects and rodents, and cause odors.

To round out typical Environmental Health programs, the staff also inspects campgrounds, manufactured home parks, schools, public swimming pools, smoking complaints, tattoo and body piercing facilities, and more.

Environmental Health programs staff play an important role in preventing or controlling disease, injury, and disability related to the interactions between people and their environment that affect quality of life, years of healthy life lived, and health disparities. Environmental Health is Public Health! Thanks to all the Environmental Health professionals for the vital work that you do.

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