

Environmental Health Technicians: A New Green Job

A Brief Overview of the Concept by Charlotte Brody, RN, Director of Chemicals, BlueGreen Alliance and Barbara Sattler, RN, DrPH, FAAN, Professor and Director, Environmental Health Education Center, University of Maryland School of Nursing

Solar energy panel installation, home energy efficiency weatherization, wind turbine production. These are most readily identified “green jobs.” As important as these clean energy and improved energy efficiency occupations are, they aren’t enough for the larger “green” task ahead of us. We suggest that there is a critical need for a new member of the health care team --- the environmental health technician --- who can create a bridge from the health center, public health clinic or tribal health center to the community and from the community back to the health center. Environmental health technicians would help communities prevent negative health outcomes linked to environmental exposures and expand the workforce and provide a career pathway for men and women by providing them with knowledge and skills that have real market value. The expanded vision for Green Jobs in this prospectus addresses the problems identified in the Center for American Progress report, *Opening Doors: How to Make the Workforce Investment Act Work for Women* and the 2009 Surgeon General’s *Call to Action to Promote Healthy Homes*.

The Problem:

In communities throughout the U.S. environmental exposures are making people sick. Environmentally-related diseases include asthma, learning and developmental disabilities, cardiovascular diseases, reproductive health and fertility problems and many more. Some disease-related, environmental exposures can be controlled by personal choices – lifestyles and purchases; some can be decreased by community-wide efforts – lead-based paint abatement programs, eliminating the use of pesticides in public parks; and some exposures will require governmental interventions at the state and/or federal levels. As important as environmental exposures are to the development of many diseases, environmental health is all but absent from the delivery of primary care health services.

There are many reasons why environmental health is not incorporated into primary care:

1. Environmental health is not taught in nursing or medical schools.
2. Environmental health assessments and interventions are not reimbursed through most public and private insurance schemes.

3. Environmental health is left to the local and state public health system and in some instances to the state department of environmental quality – but there is little to no interface between public health and primary care services.

These combined problems result in myriad lost opportunities to prevent environmentally-related diseases and promote environmentally healthy and safe communities. The solution lies in the creation of a new and different set of green jobs that provide the necessary two-way link between the health center and community to mitigate preventable negative environmental health outcomes.

The Solution:

Our most at risk communities are often those that are served by community health centers – federally-qualified health centers, Indian health centers, migrant health centers, and rural health centers. The communities these health centers serve are the Americans most likely to live in substandard housing and near hazardous industries or waste sites, most often employed in the most hazardous workplaces, most likely to lack access to health care (particularly preventative services), and most often unemployed or underemployed. Community health centers provide primary care, health education, and some community outreach. These Centers also have the potential to offer a wider array of preventative and environmental health services.

The Early Childhood Home Visitation Program for Maternal and Child Health Services and the Prevention and Public Health Funds in the Affordable Care Act along with grant programs at DOL, DOE, HHS and Education could be leveraged to create a new job category, “environmental health technician,” that would have an associated career ladder to the nursing profession, health educator, sanitarian, and other professional jobs. The importance of a career ladder is one of the key findings of the Center for American Progress *Opening Doors for Women* report. To train this new cadre of workers, an environmental health training program could be launched through the CDC’s existing Public Health Training Network (see: <http://www2.cdc.gov/PHTN/whatis.asp>). Much of the curriculum already exists, but it would need to be repackaged and repurposed to educate environmental health technician students and the physicians, nurses and other health professionals who would interact with these new graduates in community health settings.

Workers would be recruited from neighborhoods served by community health centers, often communities with high unemployment and a potential workforce that needs further training linked to real job opportunities. Workers will be provided with on-the-job training and education. Educational benefits would include tuition remission for those who want to continue their formal, higher education.

The job description for Environmental Health Technicians could include:

- Providing a link between community members, the community health center and its primary care practitioners/community educators, and the local/state agencies that are responsible for environmental/public health.
- Creating a liaison between communities and public and private programs/resources that focus on environmental risk reduction, i.e., lead-based paint programs, integrated pest management programs, Brownfields/Superfund programs
- Coordinating community-wide educational programs on health promotion/disease prevention related to environmental health risks within the community
- Making home visits / implement basic environmental assessments / recommend risk reduction strategies (Address preventable exposures such as lead, radon, carbon monoxide, unnecessary use of pesticides, solvents, volatile organic compounds, as well as common allergens/asthma triggers)
- Identifying and solving problems at the individual, family, neighborhood, and community-wide levels.

For long-term sustainability of this technician position, there will need to be a mechanism to reimburse their disease prevention/health education activities through private and public insurance schemes. A billing code for environmental disease prevention will need to be developed.

Community colleges would be engaged to assist with identifying educational approaches for career ladders. The CDC or a related government agency could create a resource library for environmental health technicians, their trainers and other members of their health care teams.

We believe that creating the occupation of environmental health technician can provide:

1. Meaningful, long-term employment for women and men in some of our deepest pockets of unemployment.
2. A significant and sustainable approach to disease prevention.
3. An expanded vision of the green and healthy future for all Americans.