

Environmental Public Health: Keeping Albertans safe

The medical and scientific evidence is clear that our physical and social environments contribute more to our life expectancy and quality of life than our personal health habits and our genetics combined. As the popular saying goes, "It's your postal code not your genetic code!" No one understands this better or has worked harder to improve conditions in Alberta than our Environmental Public Health Professionals (EHPs) – the Public Health Inspectors and Environmental Health Officers.

The 1924 Annual Report of the Alberta Department of Public Health detailed the work of Inspectors. Sanitary inspections of waterworks, sewage systems and sewage disposal plants ensured a safe and sanitary water supply. Other work such as examining private and public buildings ensured nuisances, refuse and waste did not threaten the health of the community. Then, Inspectors were required to conduct inspections in 11 health districts, which included not only waterworks and sewage disposal, but also ice supplies, nuisance grounds, livery stables, and slaughterhouses. To protect the food system, farms, meat stores, dairies, creameries, restaurants, cafes, bakeries, and ice cream and soda parlours were examined for adherence to regulations governing their sanitation.

Places where people congregated, such as hotels, lodging houses, railway stations, hospitals, and schools, were also inspected for safety. In 1924, the work of Inspectors resulted in 309 notices to eliminate hazards and 69 prosecutions. The Deputy Minister commented: "Many of the municipalities could not or would not enforce necessary sanitary regulations: as a result, the provincial government found it necessary to appoint Inspectors." As we have seen with the COVID pandemic, the willingness of government and businesses to implement precautions to protect the public has never been something to take for granted.

In 2024, we continue to rely on Environmental Public Health as a cornerstone of safe, functional and thriving communities. The work EHPs do is essential to keeping our water, food, land, air, and facilities safe. Since 1924, the field of Environmental Public Health has evolved, and the skills of these professionals have been used to help protect the health of Albertans and Canadians in many areas including:

- Food Safety – Supporting food facilities, including restaurants, food processing facilities and food service establishments, to ensure food premises maintain a high standard of food safety and sanitation to help prevent food-borne illness.
- Communicable Disease Control – Following up and providing education on communicable disease cases to limit the spread of infection.

- Personal Services – Ensuring operators who provide cosmetic personal services (tattoos, piercings, esthetics, injectables, hair, etc.) operate in a safe manner.
- Drinking and Recreational Water - Inspecting, monitoring and sampling drinking water supplies for compliance with regulatory requirements; inspecting public pools and monitoring beach water. Additionally, they may issue health orders or advisories and provide education.
- Emergency Response – Responding to urgent situations, including wildfires and floods.
- Tobacco Control – Working with tobacco and vapour product retailers to ensure their operations are in compliance with the various regulations and acts.
- Land Use – Assessing and providing guidance on Land Use development, contaminated sites, sewage disposal, and implementation of healthy community designs.
- Housing – Inspecting public rental properties that may be unsafe.
- Air Quality – Investigating, providing recommendations and issuing advisories to mitigate health risks associated with poor air quality.
- Social Care – Inspecting adult care homes and childcare facilities.

In their health promotion role, EPHPs support their communities by continually providing health education onsite through their day-to-day inspections and more formally through courses (e.g., Food Safety, Swimming Pool operation). Inspectors promote healthier living by providing recommendations on neighborhood design, transportation, housing, food systems, and the environment (AKA healthy community design).

Lastly, we must be constantly vigilant to ensure our physical and social environments are as healthy as possible and flexible enough to prepare and respond to new threats. The COVID pandemic posed a major challenge to our healthcare system in Alberta, and EPHPs played a crucial role in the protection of public health through education and enforcement of pandemic restrictions. EPHPs will undoubtedly play a crucial role in future pandemics. Climate change represents a massive threat to the health and well-being of Albertans. Responding to emergency evacuations from flooding, forest fires, extended smoke events, and extreme weather consequences will be a tremendous challenge for Public Health. It is clear our neighbours that live in poverty, are unhoused, are disabled or ill, and those already living in inadequate physical and social environments, such as Indigenous people, will be unfairly and excessively affected by future pandemics and climate change threats. We will need to be especially careful to ensure their safety and security.

As we face this future, Environmental Public Health Professionals will form a vital component of the Public Health response to prevent and reduce harm from these new hazards. Albertans need to ensure the Public Health system is resilient and sustainable to respond to existing and new threats.

Written by Manny Ahmad, President, Alberta Branch, Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors, in collaboration with the Alberta Public Health Association. For more information visit ciphi.ca/ab-nt-nu.