

What Do Environmental Health Specialists Do?

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Whenever someone asks me what I do for a living I always tell them I'm an Environmental Health Specialist, this is always followed by the next question of what is that? My patented answer has always been that we deal with everything except outdoor air and hazardous materials. That usually satisfies the person but really never answers their question. So just what does an Environmental Health Specialist (EHS) do?

Probably the program that most people know us for is the food protection program. We license and inspect approximately 900 food establishments in the eight counties and Fort Hall Reservation that our District covers. Each food establishment receives one unannounced inspection per year. We may do follow up inspections if violations are noted and we can revoke a license if an establishment fails to comply with an inspection. In addition to inspections, we also conduct complaint investigations and potential foodborne investigations. We look at these investigations as another chance to get back into an establishment and do encourage the public to call us with questions about what an establishment is doing or file complaints if they feel an establishment is operating incorrectly.

While most people probably know us for our food program, our EHS's actually spend more time in the onsite sewage disposal program. For homes which are to be served by a septic tank and drain field, we are the agency that issues the permits for onsite systems. We issue approximately 550 permits annually in the District. For each property we have an application the EHS must evaluate the property for suitability with the Rules, issue the permit for construction of the system, and inspect the system once it is installed. We also work closely with local planning and development boards on land development issues in which septic systems are being proposed.

The EHS is actively involved in inspections of childcare facilities as well. We currently inspect 480 facilities in the District and during the inspections we look at food safety, immunization records, general sanitation, and we conduct Consumer Product Safety Commission checks for recalled or hazardous products which may be found in a facility. In this program we make recommendations to licensing entities, such as the City of Pocatello or City of Chubbuck, on whether we recommend a facility should be licensed or not. Also, through a contract with the Idaho Department of Health & Welfare, we inspect childcare facilities which are a part of the Idaho Child Care Program.

Solid waste facilities (landfills) must submit to the District an operations plan which basically outlines how they are going to operate on a daily basis and stay in compliance with the Rules. The EHS is responsible for inspecting landfills and ensuring that they are operating per their plan. In addition, once a landfill closes we are responsible to ensure that it is closed properly and that the facility receives post closure care.

We license and inspect 18 public swimming pools within the District. Be aware that we do not inspect hotel/motel, fitness club, or apartment complex swimming pools as they are not considered to be public pools by Rule. The EHS inspects pools for compliance with basic pool chemistry, safety equipment, functioning mechanical equipment, record keeping, and an up to date pool operations manual. We also teach a Certified Pool Operators course every year because public swimming pools must have a certified operator before they can open.

We also have many smaller programs that we deal with on a daily basis. The EHS acts as an information 'clearinghouse' for indoor air questions, he may answer questions related to insect or spiders, he answers and investigates issues related to public health diseases such as West Nile Virus, he plans and prepares for disaster response, and he may deal with questions related to animal bites and rabies.

As you can see there are many programs that an EHS may have to deal with, in fact on some days we have to deal with all of these issues. The EHS has to be well rounded, willing to learn, and able to deal with a variety of issues throughout the course of a day.

If you would like to know more, please call us or visit our website for further information at www.sdhdidaho.org.