



The Unseen Emergency

Environmental Health Threats That Become A Public Health Crisis

Thank you for being here. This session is about public health emergencies that do not start with sirens, declarations, or hospital data. These are situations that Environmental Health staff often see first, sometimes months or years before they are recognized as emergencies.

May 2026
NPAIP Conference



Why This Matters

Public Health Emergencies Do Not Always Start As Emergencies

Many of the most serious public health risks begin quietly. By the time someone gets sick or responders are called, exposure has already occurred. Today I want to talk about what we see earlier and what that means for preparedness.



What We Mean by “Unseen”: *Early Environmental Health Warning Signs*

- Unsafe or uninhabitable housing
- Chemical exposure in living environments
- Fire damaged structures
- Drinking water and environmental contamination
- Sites near waterways or culturally significant areas

These conditions often fall between programs. They are not clearly housing, not clearly public health, and not clearly emergency management. The gap is where risk grows.

Content Advisory



- This presentation includes anonymized images of environmental health hazards such as unsafe housing, fire damaged structures, and chemical exposure environments. Images are shown for public health preparedness and responder safety education only.
- The images shown throughout this presentation are not for shock value. They are anonymized and shown only to ground this discussion in real environmental health conditions.



Environmental Health As Early Warning: *Environmental Health & Safety (EHS) as Prevention Based Preparedness*

- Exposure pathways appear before illness.
- Indicators precede emergencies
- Early intervention reduces long term harm
- When we treat Environmental Health only as enforcement, we miss its real value. EHS is often the earliest form of emergency preparedness.

Unsafe Housing & Chemical Exposure

These are situations many of you are already dealing with. They rarely start as emergencies, but they carry serious public health risk.



Drug Contaminated Environments

These environments pose exposure risks not just to occupants, but to responders, cleanup crews, and nearby communities. Often there are no visible warning signs.



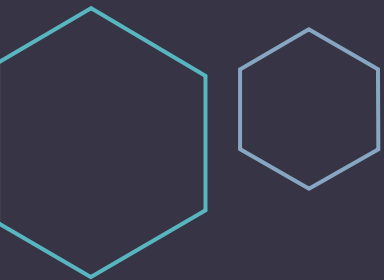
Chronic Conditions Before Emergencies

This property originally came to Environmental Health as a failed septic system and had unsafe living conditions. Enforcement had been initiated, but during COVID the case stalled, as many did across the region.



Displacement Without Support Creates New Risk

- When people are displaced without stable housing, behavioral health support, or basic services, the risk does not disappear – it moves.
- Displacement can unintentionally concentrate risk. People end up in unsafe housing, trailers, RVs, or informal encampments where there is limited sanitation, unsafe waste disposal, chemical exposure, and increased fire risk.

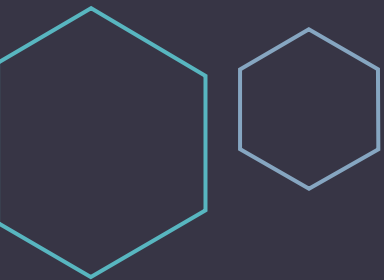


Displacement Without Support Creates New Risk Cont'd

- When systems focus only on removing the problem from one place, without addressing where people will go next, Environmental Health and emergency response eventually encounter the same hazards again (often under worse conditions).
- Effective preparedness requires coordination across housing, public health, environmental health, behavioral health, and emergency management. Without that coordination, displacement becomes a driver of future emergencies rather than a solution.



This is where preparedness either breaks the cycle or reinforces it.



A Different Approach

When Enforcement Alone Is Not Enough

- Discussing more broadly about approach, because this applies far beyond one property or one situation.
- Environmental Health and code enforcement are often structured around compliance and citation. That works in many case, but in complex situations involving Elders, veterans, mental illness, housing insecurity, or community displacement, enforcement alone can increase risk.
- A different approach means recognizing when a situation is no longer just a code issue, but a public health and preparedness issue. It means slowing down enough to listen, understand capacity and limitations, and identify what supports are missing rather than only what rules are being broken.



A Different Approach Cont'd

When Enforcement Alone Is Not Enough

- This does not mean abandoning enforcement. It means sequencing it appropriately. Counseling, coordination, and harm reduction can stabilize conditions long enough to prevent escalation while longer term solutions are developed.
- Preparedness depends on flexibility. When Environmental Health staff are empowered to adapt their approach based on risk and vulnerability, outcomes improve for residents, responders, and the broader community.

NOTICE OF ENFORCEMENT

Violators will be cited per

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH & SAFETY CODE

NO CAMPING

NO DUMPING

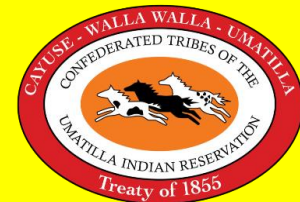
NO TRESPASSING

NO UNAUTHORIZED OCCUPANTS

FOR INQUIRIES CONTACT EHS AT

(541) 429-7521 OR EMAIL BrianFullen@ctuir.org

REMOVAL, DEFACING OR DESTRUCTION OF THIS NOTICE IS SUBJECT TO PENALTY





Even With Intervention, Risk Can Escalate

- In this situation, significant time, effort, and funding were invested prior to this house fire.
- Our program spent thousands of dollars at this site to try and maintain a home that was livable for this tribal member.
- Preparedness is not just about effort, it is also about available resources, capacity, and what supports exist beyond Environmental Health.

Shift To Life Safety

- When people lack housing options, behavioral health support, utility assistance, and community-based services, risk continues to accumulate even when Environmental Health intervention is present.
- This image represents the reality that prevention has limits when systems are stretched or incomplete. Environmental Health can reduce risk, but it cannot not eliminate it alone
- This is the point where a situation shifts from routine enforcement into a life safety environment because of known or suspected chemical exposure.



Fire & Chemical Risk

- Fire often creates a false sense of resolution. Once something burns, there can be an assumption that the hazard is gone. In reality, fire frequently increases environmental and public health risk.
- Fire damage does not remove chemical risk. In many cases, it spreads contamination into soil and surrounding areas. These sites often require an environmental health assessment even when the fire is out.
- Combustion can mobilize chemicals into ash, soil, debris, and surrounding areas. Burned structures may still contain hazardous residues, heavy metals, and contaminated materials that pose exposure risks to residents, responders, cleanup crews, and neighboring properties.
- Environmental Health involvement is still critical after the flames are out, especially to assess exposure pathways and protect people returning to the site.




Encampments & Multi Agency Response

These sites often trigger housing, behavioral health, environmental health.



Coordinated Response Required:

Encampments Requiring Coordinated Response

- Preparedness improves when roles are clear and coordination happens early, before situations escalate into emergencies. Environmental Health is most effective when included at the planning stage, not brought in after harm has already occurred.
 - Shared situational awareness matters. When programs have a common understanding of risk, response decisions become safer and more consistent, especially for frontline staff operating in uncertain environments.
 - Finally, preparedness depends on workforce support. That means acknowledging the complexity of the work, setting realistic expectations, and giving staff the backing they need to make sound judgment calls in the field.
 - When these pieces are in place, communities are better protected, responders are safer, and Environmental Health becomes a true part of emergency preparedness rather than a reactive function.
- 
- Preparedness works best when Environmental Health is seen as prevention, not just enforcement

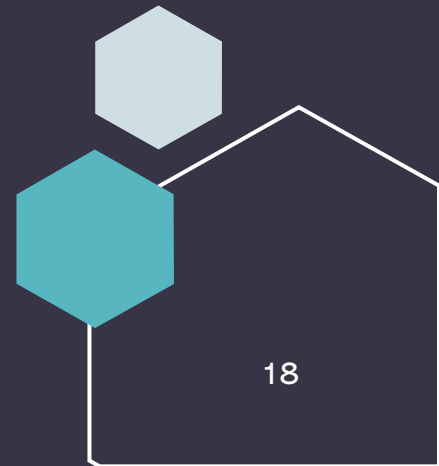


These situations highlight how unclear roles and delayed engagement increase risk to everyone involved.

Where Preparedness Breaks Down

Challenges

- Limited or outdated protocols mean teams are often reacting instead of planning. Many of these situations do not fit neatly into existing playbooks, especially when life safety, environmental hazards, and social vulnerability overlap.
- Data sharing is another major barrier. Information that could improve safety and coordination is often siloed due to jurisdictional boundaries, privacy concerns, or incompatible systems.
- Environmental Health and code enforcement staff are frequently understaffed, stretched thin, and asked to operate outside traditional roles. That strain increases burnout and reduces the system's ability to intervene early.
- Preparedness breaks down not because people are unwilling, but because systems are not built to support the complexity of what is happening on the ground.



Questions, Discussion, and Shared Experience

- What are you seeing in your community?
- Where does Environmental Health fit in your system?
- What would strengthen preparedness where you work?
- None of the challenges we've talked about today are unique to one community, and I know many of you are dealing with similar situations in different forms.
- How are these issues show up in your systems?

Contact Information



Brian Fullen
Planning Department
Environmental Health & Safety
Specialist
Phone no. : (541)429-7521
Email: brianfullen@ctuir.org