
NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
July 5, 2022

Prioritizing public health protection and Environmental Health Officer recruitment

A significant shortage of Environmental Public Health staff in Northern BC is requiring Northern Health (NH) to temporarily focus on areas of highest potential risk to public health, while aggressively recruiting for Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) who perform this important work.

EHOs are responsible for assessing public health risks, addressing health hazards in the community, and permitting and inspecting a wide range of facilities such as drinking water systems, food establishments and other regulated facilities. Since early 2020, EHOs have also played a key role in COVID-19 response, supporting compliance with Provincial Health Officer Orders, and investigating and controlling clusters and outbreaks in various settings.

“While other health regions are experiencing similar staffing challenges, Northern BC is particularly impacted and currently has approximately one third of the full complement of EHOs it requires,” said Dr. Jong Kim, NH Chief Medical Health Officer. “As we continue to actively recruit to EHO vacancies, existing staff remain committed to controlling and addressing public health risks in communities, and will prioritize efforts for the highest risk facilities and scenarios.”

Outbreaks of food-borne and water-borne illness, or of communicable disease, adverse water quality result assessments and drinking water system advisories and notices are among the highest priority scenarios for NH Environmental Public Health, and EHOs will work closely with regulated facility operators to focus inspection efforts and resources on higher-risk situations such as where inspections are significantly overdue, or there has been chronic non-compliance with health legislation.

Application processing time for a variety of facilities and permits will take longer than usual, and there will be reduced frequency of inspections for lower-risk facilities, some of which may be conducted virtually. Vendors seeking application support and approvals are encouraged to connect with Environmental Health as early in the process as possible, and to ensure their application packages are complete.

“We recognize that public health services that ensure food safety, drinking water quality, and control outbreaks of illness are incredibly important to northern BC residents,” said Tanis Hampe, NH Vice President, Population and Public Health. “We appreciate the patience and understanding of stakeholders and community members as we work to stabilize staffing and improve Environmental Public Health services, going forward.”

Northern Health continues to actively recruit to EHO vacancies, efforts which include offering incentives, working in partnership with post-secondary institutions to develop affiliation agreements and increase intake of student EHOs, and developing targeted recruitment campaigns that showcase the opportunities available in Northern BC. NH is also taking a lead role in development of EHO Analyst positions, who will be able to support the work of certified EHOs. Three of these positions have been created and filled, to date.

Anyone with concerns about matters of public health that affect the general public, is still encouraged to contact Environmental Public Health, by phone or email: [250-565-7322](tel:250-565-7322) or php@northernhealth.ca. The nature and timing of responses will be prioritized based on an assessment of potential risk to public health.

More information on Environmental Public Health services and resources for the public can be found at <https://www.northernhealth.ca/services/environmental-health>.

Media Contact: NH media line – 877-961-7724

5 July 2022

Dear partner in Public Health,

A significant shortage of Environmental Public Health staff in Northern BC is requiring Northern Health (NH) to temporarily focus on areas of highest potential risk to public health, while aggressively recruiting for Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) who perform this important work.

NH Public Health continues to proactively communicate with impacted stakeholders and partners and to inform the public about the current staffing challenges and prioritization of EHO work, through direct correspondence and [upcoming website updates](#) and public [information bulletins](#).

Outbreaks of food-borne and water-borne illness, or of communicable disease, adverse water quality result assessments and drinking water system advisories and notices are among the highest priority scenarios for NH Environmental Public Health, and EHOs will work closely with regulated facility operators to focus inspection efforts and resources on higher-risk situations such as where inspections are significantly overdue, or there has been chronic non-compliance with health legislation. Application processing time for a variety of facilities and permits will take longer than usual, and there will be reduced frequency of inspections for lower-risk facilities, some of which may be conducted virtually.

Anyone with concerns about matters of public health that affect the general public, is still encouraged to contact Environmental Health, by phone or email: 250-565-7322 or php@northernhealth.ca. All inquiries and complaints are directed through a regionalized service desk to ensure seamless and timely service delivery, as EHOs evaluate each inquiry to determine the appropriate response. Public Health hazards are characterized by the likelihood of occurrence and the severity of consequences, and high risk and urgent inquiries will be attended to immediately. Types of urgent inquiries include:

- Potential foodborne or waterborne illness outbreak
- A report of a public health hazard,
- Concerns related to flooding, fire or an emergency

At a time of year when various events and businesses need health approval to participate or open, this work also continues to be prioritized. Vendors and other applicants are encouraged to engage Environmental Public Health as early as possible in the process, and to ensure application packages are submitted with all required documents. The following link will guide you through the application processes [Applications and forms | Northern Health](#).

While other health regions are experiencing similar staffing challenges, Northern BC is particularly impacted and currently has approximately one third of the full complement of EHOs it requires. As we continue to actively recruit to EHO vacancies, existing staff remain committed to controlling and addressing public health risks in communities and will prioritize efforts for the highest risk facilities and scenarios.

Northern Health continues to actively recruit to EHO vacancies, efforts which include offering incentives, working in partnership with post-secondary institutions to develop affiliation agreements and increase intake of student EHOs, and developing targeted recruitment campaigns that showcase the opportunities available in Northern BC. NH is also taking a lead role in development of EHO Analyst positions, to support the work of EHOs. Three of these positions have been created and filled, to date.

If you have any questions, please contact our Environmental Health Protection Team at 250-565-7322 or php@northernhealth.ca.