

11-16-18 The Silver Crown

I recently had the pleasure of being on a panel at Bridgewater State University speaking about careers in health-related fields. The other three included a physical therapist, an outreach nurse specializing in reducing HIV, and a researcher. Just as I was the oldest student in the class twenty-six years ago, now I was the oldest panelist. Would my experience be respected? Or would I be seen as the old lady?

I asked the students how many knew what a health agent was. Not a single hand was raised. This is the response I was expecting. I set out to not only tell them about the work of a health agent but also to convince them that this was a career path for caring people with a passion for solving and preventing problems.

I did not tell them that many years ago I discouraged an eighteen-year-old from pursuing this work. At the time, I was overwhelmed. Many health agents feel the same way when they start. It takes time to build relationships, to get to know their community and its needs and to learn how to bring a voice for those needs to those who must listen. It takes time to demonstrate that assistance is needed and how much more can be accomplished with some help.

Now, many years later, I would encourage that same young woman. I soon discovered that it is very rewarding work! With support, problems can be solved and, better yet, problems can be prevented. However, without the help of competent staff and sound direction by a board with integrity, the agent is a slave to reactions, hopping here and there to put out fires.

So, future health agents, take note: At the time of interview, (and before) find out about the board of health. What are their occupations? How often do they have a quorum? What do they see as the needs of the community? What do they expect of you? Are they willing to listen to your ideas? How much office staff is available? Of course, you want to be able to tell the board why you want this job and why you are well qualified for it. There is more than one path for becoming qualified and that is a good thing.

Maybe you studied biology, and this knowledge will apply to food and water and the environment. Maybe you loved earth science, and this would apply to soil evaluation for perc tests. Maybe you love people and want to help them. Those experiences are all good preparation for and good reasons for becoming a health agent.

Currently we do, in fact, arrive from different backgrounds. Some are Certified Health Officers. Some are Registered Sanitarians. Some have a Master's degree in Health Promotion. While the path may not be standardized, the goals are. We need to be able to conduct inspections for housing, beaches, spas, schools, restaurants, institutions, body art establishments, septic systems, and the environment, plan for emergencies, respond to complaints, assess the community, initiate programs and remain calm and have empathy while talking to distraught people, all in the name of protecting public health.

There are pathways for both horizontal and upward mobility, too. A health agent may specialize in one aspect of inspectional services. Another may become a consultant. Another may move on to work for the State's Department of Public Health or Environmental Protection. Some are specializing in emergency preparedness or writing grants. The learning curve is ongoing and so are the sources of knowledge.

If this sounds interesting to you or someone you know, there are many opportunities right around the bend, as many health agents are baby boomers, retiring left and right. My hair is getting very grey and I am not alone in my professional grey-ness. (Well, I might look alone but the others are coloring their hair!) I call it my Silver Crown and I earned it! So, if you eschew boredom, love a challenge and want to help, consider being a health agent. Please.

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