

# A century of support

*Office of Public Health helps keep National Parks pristine*

# 100 YEARS

By Capt. Sara Newman and Melissa DeVaughn

**F**OR 100 YEARS, THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE HAS been dedicated to protecting health and promoting parks as a health resource for visitors. In fact, the NPS is the only land management agency in the United States with an Office of Public Health (OPH) working behind the scenes to make sure that those of us who frequent our National Parks can focus on what matters: stunning peaks, lush forests and abundant wildlife, among so much more.

“The work we do mitigates the risk of visitors getting sick from the water, food, wildlife or insects that can transmit diseases, and allows the public to enjoy our nation’s parks and get healthy,” says OPH director, Dr. Sara Newman, a captain in the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) and one of nearly 60 USPHS Commissioned Corps officers assigned to NPS from the Department of Health and Human Services.

The NPS could not operate without that work, either, says Deny Galvin, who had a 38-year career in the NPS, nine of those as deputy director under three administrations.

“They’re really partners in making these systems work in the parks,” Galvin says. “In lobbying for the creation of the NPS, Stephen Mather (its first director) said he wanted to keep the agency small and efficient without a lot of overhead. The creation of cooperative agreements with those with ‘outhouse expertise’ really comes out of that outlook that Mather had.”

Since 1921, the NPS has formally partnered with the USPHS to assign officers to address the public health issues in national parks. Even before that, the seeds of this relationship were planted. In 1918, Yellowstone’s acting superintendent Chester A. Lindsley expressed concern about unsanitary conditions at the park, and USPHS sanitary engineer Lt. Everett Judson was sent to document the condition of the water and wastewater systems there. Lindsley outlined the steps needed to remedy the inadequacies in a report that is among the first of many documents showing the cross-agency cooperation between NPS and USPHS.

Today the OPH continues to protect and promote the health of employees and visitors on public lands. However, as the scope of public health has

grown, so has the diversity of public health professionals required to meet the public health needs of the Service. In addition to engineers, there are environmental health officers who make sure food is safe, test water for contaminants, inspect wastewater operations and work with OPH epidemiologists (a medical doctor and a veterinarian) to conduct disease surveillance, outbreak investigation, and implement mitigation strategies to protect park visitors from infectious disease. Think of the OPH as an internal health department, there to provide support for parks on public health issues through prevention and response services.

In addition to the 22 officers and three civilians assigned to the OPH, there are approximately 40 other officers assigned directly to parks or regions to support occupational health, engineering and clinical needs across the Service. And in 2009, the agreement between the NPS and the USPHS expanded to all bureaus in the Department of the Interior (DOI), with several officers now assigned to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the DOI.

“We believe this original agreement could be the oldest between two federal agencies,” Newman said. “The need and demand then weren’t much different than today. We still have this anchor in inspecting NPS water, wastewater, food and dealing with the vectors of disease. The concerns about malaria and typhus back then now include a range of infectious disease concerns such as hantavirus, plague, rabies, and tickborne illnesses. And with a warming climate, we are seeing diseases in our nation that we once only saw in tropical areas of the globe, so demand for our services is growing.”

Perhaps no other time than now demonstrates the importance of this interagency agreement. With a coronavirus pandemic raging worldwide, life as most people know it has changed dramatically. But this OPH-NPS cooperation remains steadfast. OPH not only responds when a health crisis emerges, but more important, it works behind the scenes to prevent these incidents in the first place.

It’s a demanding job, with officers on the road for 12 to 17 weeks a year, going from park to park for inspections, Newman said. Not only must her staff

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Some team members from the Office of Public Health at the Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool. **Back row, from left:** Cmdr. Kevin Bingley, Capt. Craig Ungerecht, Cmdr. Jonathan Blonk, Capt. Chris Glime, Lt. Mathew Kozler, Cmdr. Amanda Parris, Lt. Cmdr. Stephanie Bridges, Cmdr. Bill Fournier, and Cmdr. Jeremy Mason. **Middle row:** OPH Deputy Director Sonya Coakley, Lt. Cmdr. Jessica Sharpe, Lt. Cmdr. George Carroll, Capt. Sara Newman, and Lt. Cmdr. David Kostamo. **Kneeling:** Cmdr. Kurt Kesteloot and Cmdr. George Larsen. Photo: Office of Public Health

be qualified to conduct inspections, but they also need to be multitalented in many other ways.

“Our officers have three skillsets in one: They are engineers, they are environmental health specialists and they are epidemiologists,” Newman said. “They inspect thousands of systems – many located in some of the most hard-to-reach places, requiring them to hike miles and miles or even take river rafts – to make sure visitors don’t get sick from food, and that the septic systems work.”

To be successful, she added, these officers must be highly effective communicators, excellent planners, and rely on quick and steady judgment to make lifesaving decisions.

“They are always there and they are always streamlined,” Galvin says. “If you look at the volume of the work they must do and the hours they put in, it is clear that it is a busy job.”

Newman further explains that USPHS Commissioned Corps officers assigned from HHS proudly serve with over 6,000 other officers who are also assigned to some 25 U.S. Federal agencies around the nation and the globe.

“We have a dual responsibility to the agencies to which we are assigned, and to our U.S. Surgeon General to protect, promote and advance the health of our nation,” Newman says.

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Jerome Adams, a vice admiral in the USPHS, is a frequent park user with his family. He says he is honored to join the NPS in celebrating this 100-year partnership.

“There is no other agreement like this in our nation that provides such an important opportunity for our public health officials to make it safe for the American people to connect with nature and their most precious cultural resources to improve health,” he says. “I am proud of the hundreds of officers who have served our park system over the years and look forward to building our partnership into the future.”

## LOOKING FORWARD

In recent years, the OPH has broadened its reach, promoting the health and well being of park visitors through its Health Promotion Branch and its Healthy Parks Healthy People program, with ties to a global movement to harness the power of parks and public lands as a health resource for all. It is an effort that is deeply rooted in the purpose and mission of the NPS, so dovetails smoothly between the two agencies. The recognition of parks as a source of health and healing for the American public was a primary inspiration for the founding of the NPS. The word ‘health’ is enshrined in the first set of NPS management principles set forth in 1916. In fact, the first annual report of the NPS identified that, in addition to “stimulating patriotism” and “diverting tourists travel to scenic areas of the United States,” a distinct function of the national parks was to “further health.”

As the OPH heads into its next 100 years with the NPS, Newman is optimistic that her office can further support parks as they face current and future challenges. From a warming climate that brings with it fires and floods, to racial health disparities, to the ever mutating face of such infectious diseases as COVID-19, the OPH has the expertise to address today’s most pressing issues, and to ultimately strengthen the NPS as a whole.

“I am proud of all we have done to support our parks in the last 100 years, but also excited about how the efforts of our park leaders and our public health experts assigned here can serve as a model for protecting and promoting health for all into the future,” says Newman.

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