How have others approached the task of maintaining a sound and effective occupational health and safety program? We asked colleagues Dr. Ronald Banks, Director of the Office of Laboratory Animal Resources at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center, and Dr. Harold Farris, Jr., Associate Vice President for Research Compliance at Clemson University (also a member of AAALAC’s Council on Accreditation) to share their experiences...

What do you feel are the keys to maintaining a successful occupational health and safety (OHS) program?

Dr. Farris cited three, “First, commitment and strong administrative support from the CEO and upper-level management for a safe workplace. Second is recognizing that well-trained and certified personnel in fields such as environmental health and safety (EHS) and medical surveillance, are necessary to ensure a safe work environment, and recognizing that an OHS program is an essential component of the infrastructure necessary to support high-quality research. Third, the EHS and OHS units must have clearly defined responsibility and authority.”

Dr. Banks recommends forming a committee that represents all potential users—researchers, veterinary staff, students, institutional officials, health care and occupational health departments, administration, etc.—to design the OHS program. “This allowed us to ‘battle’ the specifics in a committee session and run a few trials with scenarios to see if the program would work at our institution. It saved us from having to test the program design on the principal investigator.”

Banks’ committee believed that a simple, non-intrusive program would be most easily accepted. To increase the “user-friendliness” of their OHS program, they enrolled the care providers and veterinary staff first. Enrollment included getting the group through the testing, vaccination and questionnaire processes. After this was completed, they interviewed those involved in order to gauge the appropriateness of the process and make any necessary changes.

What first steps or advice would you offer an institution looking to improve its OHS program?

Dr. Farris recommends contracting an outside audit of your EHS/OHS program to get some independent, expert advice. Dr. Banks advises, “Don’t rush. Get copies of programs that seem to work, assess your situation completely, and build for ease and functionality—not for regulatory fear.”

Banks also adds that OHS “Is a daily challenge. There is never a time to relax on this issue—only times of reassessment and rededication to improving the ‘assurance umbrella’ for workers. Few OHS issues take tremendous outlays of time and effort, but rather a few moments of logical review and insight. The key is an OHS staff that is interested in your problems.” To generate that interest, Banks ‘tours’ occupational health representatives through his facilities several times a year. He also offers to host the local occupational health training program, and allows students to use his facility as a class project. Banks asks for copies of the students’ reports, and uses the ideas of young occupational health professionals as a source of fresh insights on addressing particular issues.

What do you feel is the biggest challenge in maintaining a good OHS program?

Dr. Banks feels it’s getting new laboratory staff enrolled. “Ultimately, we plan on tying occupational health approval to access to the animal rooms. But we are just now entering the ‘enroll the research staff’ phase. For now, we plan on using the IACUC approval process as the gatekeeper—we don’t think it’s a great solution, but it’s the best we have at the moment.” Dr. Farris commented that continued administrative support for appropriate funding and staffing is always a challenge.