

How Public Health can Address Climate Change

Greenhouse gas emissions from human activity are increasing the earth's temperature, resulting in extreme weather events that have serious health consequences. Vulnerable communities will likely have some of the greatest exposures to climate-related health impacts and the fewest resources to confront them.¹ This is a public health issue and public health professionals can play a key role in addressing it.

We Can Address Climate Change. We Can Impact Health.

The following are suggested actions public health staff can take to address climate change at work. We urge you to carry out some of these and encourage your leadership or staff to implement them so that your organization is doing its part to confront this threat to public health.



Research

- Complete internal needs assessments and community vulnerability assessments to gather baseline data.
- Map geographic areas for impacts over time.
- Partner with other agencies to monitor key data changes (i.e., weather, neighborhood, and health outcomes). Include health data and maps on County or City website for use by others.
- Work with relevant agencies in your jurisdiction to examine emissions related to your health department's purchasing policy, building energy use, and staff travel.

Education and Outreach

- Conduct trainings on the health impacts of climate change for department staff, medical professionals, staff in related departments, and community-based organizations.
- Post climate change web links and information to your department's website, professional network list-serves and email tags.
- Use local data to identify opportunities to address climate change.
- Empower all staff working with the community to integrate messages into existing prevention programs about the health co-benefits of addressing climate change. For example, did you know global warming affects pollen release, which can lead to an increase in asthma and other respiratory problems?

Spotlight on Santa Clara County

As part of its CDC funded Communities Putting Prevention to Work Obesity Prevention Initiative, the Santa Clara County Public Health Department (SCCPHD) worked with jurisdictions and community organizations on environmental strategies to increase the use of active transportation and the consumption of local fresh food. Some of the strategies were: creation of a city Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project, expansion of the acceptance of Cal Fresh EBT cards at farmers' markets, adoption of Safe Routes to School policies in school districts and cities, creation of a bilingual bike map, development of zoning standards to implement active transportation policies in a city general plan, and amendment of a city code to reduce parking requirements. SCCPHD also embarked on a new collaboration with the Office of Planning to create a Health Element, which will be the first of its kind in the County and will help shape other elements of the General Plan.

“Climate change is one of the most serious health threats facing our nation. Yet few Americans are aware of the very real consequences of climate change on the health of our communities, our families and our children.”

- Dr. Georges Benjamin
Executive Director, American Public Health Association

Healthy Policies

- Promote community engagement in local climate change planning and alert residents to local opportunities for civic participation.
- Develop relationships with local planning bodies and provide public health input in decision-making processes. Some examples are local climate action, sustainable communities and transportation planning groups.
- Support local and regional agriculture. Support adoption of policies to increase access to locally grown food (i.e. farmer's markets and community gardens). Establish nutritional food procurement policies that support the use of locally sustainably produced food.
- Support “urban greening” efforts (i.e., extending tree canopies, urban gardens, rooftop gardens, park systems, and trails)

Public Health Programs and Plans

- Continuously seek “co-benefit” opportunities to address climate change prevention and readiness planning while addressing other health concerns. Integrate climate change interventions into grant proposals, work scopes, and objectives, where appropriate. Examples of programs where climate change and health objectives can easily be integrated include Healthy Homes, Chronic Disease, Injury Prevention, and Emergency Preparedness.
- Include strategies to address the underlying conditions of disease and injury in all program plans and subcontracting opportunities, with particular attention to the factors that lead to inequitable health outcomes. Can your programs and investments move further “upstream” and also impact climate change? (i.e., increased access to affordable transit promotes physical activity for all income levels while addressing obesity and greenhouse gas emissions).

Spotlight on San Francisco County

Because of its temperate climate, most people don't view San Francisco as a place of concern for extreme heat events, but climate models predict that heat waves will increase in frequency and severity and San Francisco is particularly vulnerable because of its lack of physiologic and technologic adaptations. Heat related illness can lead to a significant public health burden and is largely preventable. In response to this important public health concern, the San Francisco Department of Public Health developed an environmental health assessment to determine which areas of the community are particularly vulnerable to heat waves. This assessment will be used to help publicize the public health consequences of climate change on human health, feed into a heat wave disaster response plan, and develop interventions that can be aimed at advancing urban health and environmental justice.

It is the mission of the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative to transform public health practice for the purpose of eliminating health inequities using a broad spectrum of approaches that create healthy communities.

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REFERENCES

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- NACCHO Toolkit: The NACCHO Climate Change toolkit has documents that have been prescreened and selected for use by public health staff. To access the toolkit go to: www.naccho.org/toolkit and select climate change toolkit in the drop down box.
- Climate Action Plans: The California Department of Public Health published a guide for how public health departments can work with cities in the adoption of Climate Change Plans. It provides information on the intersection of public health and community planning. The guide, “Climate Action for Health: Integrating Public Health into Climate Action Planning” February 2012 can be found on line at: http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/CCDPHP/Documents/CAPS_and_Health_Published3-22-12.pdf
- For more information, refer to the California Air Pollution Control Officers Association (CAPCOA) resource Quantifying Greenhouse Gas Mitigation Measures.
- “Public Health and Climate Change: A Guide for Increasing the Capacity of Local Public Health Departments” The Resource Innovation Group (TRIG) & Biositu, LLC (2012)
- “Conveying the Human Implications of Climate Change: A Climate Change Communication Primer for Public Health Professionals” Maibach E, Nisbet M, & Weathers M. (2011) George Mason University Center for Climate Change Communication
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