

Program Summary

Overview

The Center for Public Health Policy at the American Public Health Association (APHA) highlights the connections between communities — where we live, work, play and learn — and our collective health. The Center advances evidence-based policies and practices to address the social determinants of health and create health equity for all. With an experienced staff and a vast network of diverse partners, the Center creates innovative, original and informative resources that support APHA's central challenge: *To create the healthiest nation in one generation.* The Environmental Health Program within the Center, which focuses on both the built and natural environments, leads efforts to increase access to healthy living, create environmental justice across places and provide a voice for environmental public health practitioners. The Program promotes healthy community design through safe and equitable transportation, active transportation, healthy housing and food systems. To protect and improve the natural environment, the Program addresses the public health impacts of climate change and promotes chemical, air, soil and water safety. In addition, the Program builds partnerships, which use unified messaging to advance the field of environmental public health.

Recent environmental public health crises have raised concerns about the status of the nation's state and local environmental public health systems. Governmental environmental public health programs have experienced substantial restructuring and budget cuts at a time of deteriorating infrastructure and climate change, leaving them with insufficient human and financial resources. As a result, we are left with important questions about the agencies in which services are situated, how the community interacts with and accesses these services, the requisites for an ideal system, the role of non-governmental partners and the most effective ways for various sectors to work together.

Children aged 0 to 8 years are often the most vulnerable population to experience the consequences of inadequate or unresponsive environmental public health systems. For their size, they breathe more air and eat more food than adults, which makes them particularly vulnerable to environmental public health hazards. Furthermore, while all communities experience the consequences of environmental contaminants, communities of color and low-income communities are disproportionately impacted. Children of color and children living in poverty bear a high burden of lead exposures, lead toxicity and other environmental hazards. However, it is unclear whether governmental public health and environmental quality agencies, have identified young children as a priority population for programs and policies, whether their efforts have had an impact on children's health outcomes (i.e. decrease in asthma prevalence, lead exposure, poisoning-related illnesses, air quality and toxic chemical exposure), and whether the services they offer are easily accessible to parents and children.

APHA, with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, will conduct a state-level scan of departments of health and environmental quality to gain an understanding of accessibility of information available to the public about essential environmental health services. The project presents an opportunity to identify gaps in existing policies and services, formulate policy recommendations, contribute to codifying best practices and develop advocacy strategies. Additionally, APHA will speak with select communities to conduct a deeper examination of the environmental public health system's ability to respond to a community concern.

National Scan of Environmental Public Health Systems

State-and local-level environmental public health systems are essential to preventing and mediating harmful environmental exposures. This project will expose gaps in the system, particularly as it pertains to young children, help explain the challenges communities face and make recommendations on where efforts and resources might be needed most.

The aim of this national scan is to gain a sense of the current accessibility of environmental public health systems across the United States, particularly with regard to the needs of young children. APHA seeks to illuminate lessons learned, share successes, and identify areas for improvement.

Community Profiles

APHA also seeks to communicate opportunities to institutionalize improvements identified in the national scan. This will be accomplished by visiting select communities to learn about best practices and challenges in reaching the appropriate authority on environmental and public health questions. APHA will also visit health departments and departments of environmental quality to learn about their efforts and limitations. These meetings, along with key informant interviews, will help illuminate best practices, and identify gaps and common themes within the environmental public health system. The lessons learned will be used to offer recommendations and next steps for how to build an environmental public health system that effectively serves the community in which it resides. Additionally, APHA will spotlight local stories to illustrate the human impact and give greater, immediate value to the importance of strengthening environmental public health systems.

Contact

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