



APHA's Climate Change and Health Needs Assessment

Fall 2017-Winter 2018



Climate change increasingly presents serious, complex challenges to the public's health. In response to these challenges, the American Public Health Association's Center for Climate, Health and Equity inspires action on climate and health, advances equitable climate policies and galvanizes the public health field to address climate change.

In late 2017, APHA set out to identify the needs of the public health community to integrate climate change as a health issue. Building on the momentum of the 2017 Year of Climate Change and Health,¹ APHA engaged members,² affiliate representatives,³ public leaders, funders and health professionals to answer two questions:

1

What does the field of public health need to move the needle on climate change and health discourse?

2

What can APHA offer to public health practitioners and partners to help them take action?

Findings

Early Successes

APHA members and public health leaders have elevated climate change to a high priority for public health programming both at APHA and in their home organizations. Current section⁴ activities focus on increasing communications and developing a "voice" to amplify the connection between climate change and health through outreach within APHA membership and to external stakeholders. Strategies to increase communications include creating policy statements, developing resources and trainings for education and advocacy, adding additional sessions at the APHA Annual Meeting and tracking current international climate change and health-related work.

Respondents viewed the sections' communications with APHA membership to increase education and awareness around climate change and health as a primary success. Over a dozen sections have engaged with climate change and health issues, and attendance is consistently high for climate-themed roundtables and sessions at annual meetings. Other membership successes include policy creation, response to federal rollbacks on climate change and increased climate change-related activities at the APHA Annual Meeting.

¹ APHA's 2017 Year of Climate Change and Health was a yearlong initiative to raise awareness of the health impacts of climate change and to mobilize action.

² APHA membership is a professional community that facilitates education, collaboration and the gaining of knowledge. Members of APHA are individuals in the public health professional sphere in some capacity.

³ APHA affiliates are state and regional public health associations that champion the same goals as APHA to promote, protect and advocate for the public's health. They are independently established and have their own infrastructure, policies, processes and procedures.

⁴ APHA sections are the primary professional units of APHA and conduct activities that promote the mission and fulfill the goals of APHA. Sections represent major public health disciplines or public health programs.

Areas for Growth

Discussions of APHA's work around climate change and public health highlighted three areas of needed action:

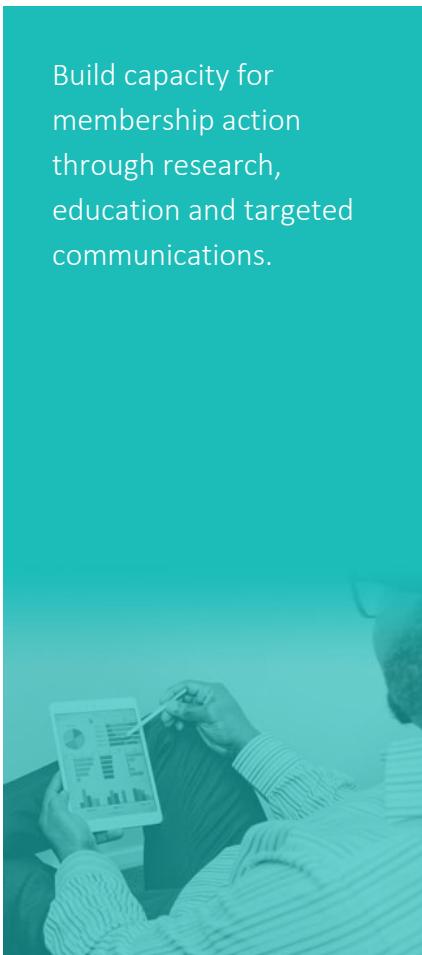
- Build capacity for membership action through research, education and targeted communications.
- Strengthen APHA's leadership as a resource clearinghouse and messenger for member sections and the public on climate change and public health issues.
- Collaborate across sectors and sections to promote community climate resilience and long-term, sustainable system transformation.

These three areas will drive future efforts of APHA's Center for Climate, Health and Equity and are described in greater detail below.

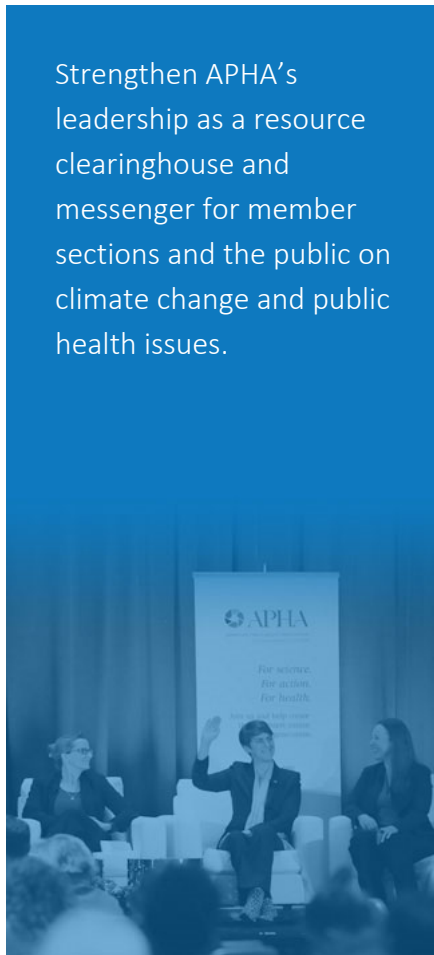
Challenges & Opportunities

The needs assessment revealed three themes as critical action areas to advance programming and policy at the intersection of climate change and public health. These themes represent opportunities for APHA's Center for Climate, Health and Equity to organize efforts and create resources that directly respond to needs.

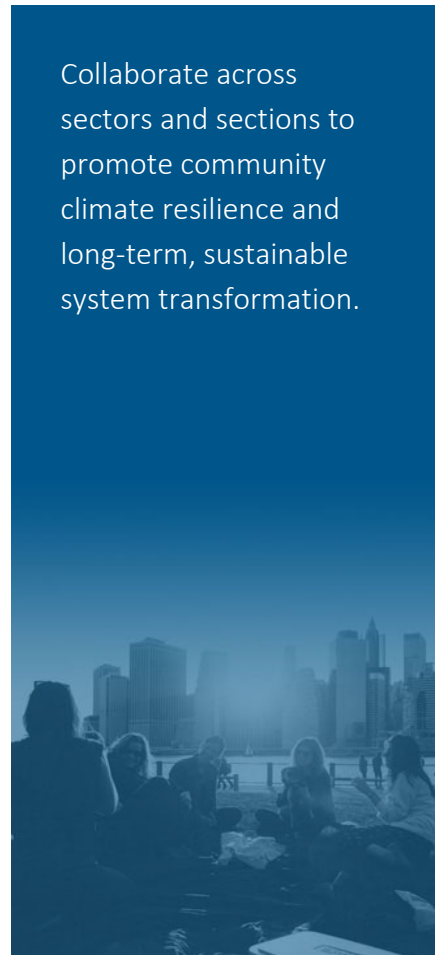
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Build capacity for membership action through research, education and targeted communications.

Challenge: APHA membership acknowledged a lack of capacity and people power to make meaningful progress given that members are working as volunteers with often limited expertise. One section member explained, *“It is a constant challenge how to create a culture of people that want to do work.”* Further complicating progress is a lack of metrics around the impact of climate change discussions and advocacy work. *“It would be great to have guidelines and metrics so APHA as a whole can be tracking progress and go from qualitative and quantitative points of view,”* another member explained.

Figure 1 illustrates that climate change interest is increasing among APHA affiliates at the same time that affiliates’ self-perceived expertise is declining.

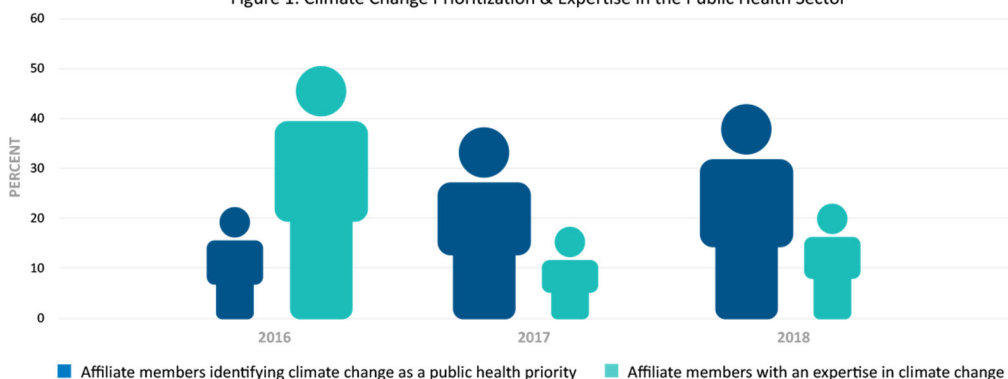
Opportunity: APHA can help equip practitioners to shift the narrative of climate

change as a critical public health issue with strategic communications and resources. Among APHA affiliates, factsheets are the most preferred communication tool⁵ due to their simplicity and distribution ease. Other popular resources include webinars, talking points, policy trainings and regional health impact trainings. To build momentum outside of APHA, members are seeking and developing resources like success metrics, policy statements and tools for education and advocacy.

APHA supports a coordinated approach to boosting climate change expertise and will continue to build capacity within the Center for Climate, Health and Equity. Research and education that is rooted in equity and justice will have the greatest impacts on shifting the national discourse on climate change. Plans are in motion to develop training materials, host educational webinars, draft studies at the intersection of climate change and public health and pursue support for a “Climate, Health and Equity Playbook” with tear-and-share chapters similar to APHA’s “Environmental Health Playbook.” The Center will continue to support membership in clearly framing the issue with easily accessible language.

Some APHA members and affiliates face limitations on engaging with the climate change space due to the political nature of their positions in state and local government. Given this challenge, APHA can continue to offer adaptable resources for use on a variety of scales to help build capacity and advance climate change-related programming. When feasible, APHA can lend its communications platform for outreach and amplification or support partnership-building with national, state or local advocacy and health organizations.

Figure 1: Climate Change Prioritization & Expertise in the Public Health Sector



⁵ In 2018, 65% of affiliates identified factsheets as their most preferred communication tool. Factsheets were rated highly in 2016 and 2017 as well.

Strengthen APHA's leadership as a resource clearinghouse and messenger for member sections and the public on climate change and public health issues.

Challenge: Some section members indicated that climate change has not received enough formal support from APHA leadership in the past. *"I think it's really important for APHA to work in closer partnership with members. We are always strategizing about what we can do as individuals and together. We need more support and partnership with APHA staff to move things forward,"* explained a section member. Another said that they *"need some feedback from APHA about what to do next"* and would appreciate it if *"a sounding board within APHA were to say, 'Here's an idea that can help you move forward.'"*

There is a clear need for more feedback from APHA staff on APHA-wide goals for the climate change topic and more clarity on who will be impacted and how. Some section members also expressed a need for more APHA staff to offer section support, explaining that *"if communication comes through APHA, it establishes leadership and authority and that we have backing with us on this ... It helps tremendously."*

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Opportunity: As a trusted messenger, APHA will continue to use its national platform to drive home the climate change and public health connection. Through collaborating partners and publications, APHA can continue to offer the latest in climate change research and serve as a resource clearinghouse to empower public health and healthcare professionals as messengers. Using its communications resources as a foundation, APHA can create, brand and refine messages to promote a national media campaign around the intersection of climate change and public health work.

By launching the Center for Climate, Health and Equity in November 2018, APHA leadership has signaled serious investment in climate and health issues. A full-time Climate Change Program Manager joined APHA in March 2019 to offer more direct support to members on climate activities. For additional support, the Center also published a web presence and established an internship program for university and graduate students.

Collaborate across sectors and sections to promote community climate resilience and long-term, sustainable system transformation.

Challenge: There is an interest in more cross-sectoral collaboration broadly and cross-sectional collaboration within APHA due to the impact of climate change on all aspects of health. A section member said, *“It’s a challenge to anticipate or figure out how the work we are trying to do fits with the work of other APHA sections.”* Another member elaborated, *“It is a daunting task to identify and organize section chairs, as well as affiliate leaders and volunteer members. So, if there is a way to work with APHA headquarters to better develop and communicate with members representing affiliates that would really help to bring those voices.”*

Thinking beyond APHA, a Climate Change Topic Committee member explained, *“Real opportunity for progress in moving forward [together] is at the state level. APHA has affiliates in every state. We would like to see APHA make a serious effort to engage state affiliates to push forward climate policy at state level.”* Regarding cross-sectoral collaborations, a member said, *“Part of what is also important is to not get siloed so that we in the U.S. collaborate between industries. So, whether it’s business organizations, professional organizations... technology, farming, whatever. We really need to go out of our usual comfort zone to partner with people outside of health.”*

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Opportunity: APHA maximizes its positive influence when it connects with diverse stakeholders within and outside of the public health arena. There is a push to strengthen partnerships both internally with sections, caucuses and affiliates and externally with climate change and health partners across sectors. APHA affiliates are most interested in engaging with vulnerable populations, environmental justice communities and populations affected by natural disasters for collaboration. Further, there is interest in connecting public health students with climate-sensitive communities to create opportunities for learning by doing. Long-lasting systemic change is sustainable only once vulnerable communities are actively engaged and supported.

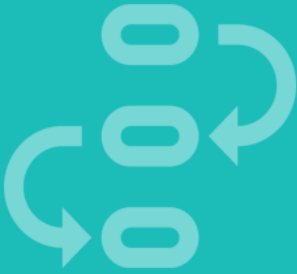
Funders represent another critical opportunity for fruitful collaboration. Funders value quarterly meetings with APHA and need to be encouraged to break down funding silos so that partners can work together. An innovative approach to consider is promoting the funding of collaborative efforts to pilot creative and collective solutions, i.e. translating science to practice, promoting train-the-trainer opportunities, etc.

*“We really need to go out of our usual comfort zone to **partner with people** outside of health.”*



Conclusion

Climate change is the greatest threat to public health today. Although climate change ranks highly as a major threat among APHA members and affiliates, action and policy development are often deprioritized due to limited resources and tools. As the nation's leading public health voice, APHA made an early commitment to climate change as a health issue and is poised to augment efforts in critical ways:



Develop a health framework that will better connect pro-climate actions with priority existing values, helping to deepen political and social support while spurring actions to address climate change.



Leverage the authentic relationships the public health field enjoys with broad and diverse constituencies.



Apply APHA's public health and health equity lenses to help shape climate policy, engagement and action to better address the needs of climate-sensitive populations.

Thanks to actively engaged members and affiliates, APHA has a clear understanding of the necessary direction of future climate change and health engagement and action. APHA will continue to strive to advance awareness of climate change and health issues, prioritize health equity, spur pro-climate policy development and encourage multidisciplinary scientific solutions.

Under the guidance of a Steering Committee and Advisory Board, the Center for Climate, Health and Equity will seek to further the opportunities presented by climate challenges to advance the field of climate change and health. Our vision is a future where climate change is a national priority with broad political and social support and that climate strategies are implemented to improve public health and health equity.

Data Collection Process

APHA connected with health funders, leaders, partners and engaged members to see what was needed in terms of climate change and health resources. The needs assessment includes analysis of data collected from informational interviews with individual members, as well as in a facilitated roundtable discussion on how APHA members and partners engaged with materials during the Year of Climate Change and Health.

In 2017 and 2018, APHA used breakouts; roundtables; a funder's breakfast; interviews with climate change experts and non-experts; phone discussions with members of APHA's Environment, International Health and Mental Health Sections; and a series of member and affiliate surveys to gain insight into the needs of the public health community.

Data Collection Methods



Climate Changes Health Roundtable discussion and worksheet

The roundtable took place during the 2017 APHA Annual Meeting and included ~100 attendees representing partners and leaders across APHA's member sub-groups. Roughly 50 participants completed a five-item worksheet to share additional information about climate change-related work.



Climate and Health Funder's Breakfast

The breakfast took place during 2017 APHA's Annual Meeting and included philanthropic foundations and federal government funders with an interest in funding climate change and health-related initiatives.



Key Informant Interviews with experts and non-experts

Climate change experts (n=9) represented organizations that are involved in climate change activities. All but one interview was completed face-to-face during the 2017 APHA Annual Meeting. Non-experts (N=6) represented organizations that are not extensively involved in climate change activities and were interviewed by phone following the APHA Annual Meeting.



Phone discussion groups

Three phone discussions were conducted in late 2018 with leaders and members from three APHA sections: Environment (n=4), International (n=2) and Mental Health (n=3). The discussion groups ran roughly an hour. The data was coded and analyzed through review of the notes and recordings, allowing key themes or patterns of response to emerge.



Secondary data analysis of APHA survey data

A secondary data analysis was conducted on the following data collected by APHA: 1) APHA's Affiliate Advocacy and Policy Survey (2016, 2017 and 2018), 2) a survey conducted among *The Nation's Health* newspaper recipients and 3) the 2018 Membership Survey.

