



August 17, 2016 | ☀️ 77° | 🚗 Check Traffic

Editorial | Island Voices

We need to be prepared for health impacts of climate change

By Nancy S. Partika

Posted August 16, 2016

August 16, 2016

In our public health education and training, we emphasize that public health is a unique primary player and stakeholder in the processes of identifying, assessing and addressing local, national and global issues of public health significance.

The Asia-Pacific region is widely viewed as one of the most at-risk areas globally for the effects of climate change, with rising sea level inundating entire island nations.

Despite the visibly growing international and national concern over the impact of climate change on health, until recently the amount of dialogue on the health impacts of climate change in Hawaii was relatively minimal, and lacked a strong voice for public health in climate change policy discussions.

Similarly, health policy discussions did not account much for the anticipated impacts of climate change.

In 2015, the Hawaii Legislature passed a resolution (HCR 108, SD1) to establish the Hawaii Working Group on Climate Change and Health under the state Department of Health and the Hawaii Public Health Association, to initiate discussion on actions to address the public health implications of climate change and health in Hawaii.

The 15-member, appointed group met monthly from August 2015 through May 2016. Its findings and recommendations closely paralleled recent national findings and

recommendations on major risks such as extreme heat and droughts, worsening air quality, flooding, vector-borne and water-related infections, and mental health.

The group recommended that a major focus for health should be on comprehensive and coordinated adaptation strategies grounded in the collaboration of scientists/researchers, planners and policymakers to support our adaptation to changing environmental challenges and conditions.

Also recommended: that the state Department of Health have increased dedicated fiscal and personnel resources to support its efforts to address climate and health issues.

Finally, it recommended that protections against both infectious and chronic climate-associated disease threats be strengthened.

The working group completed its initial mission in May and will meet on an ad hoc basis going forward. Gov. David Ige's administration has pledged to merge health perspectives into its future broader climate change efforts.

Once we collectively acknowledge that this will likely be the most significant public health crisis we all face, we then need to collaborate across our traditional public health silos that we work in to create adaptation plans for the anticipated wide range of public health issues we face.

Changing what we do and how we do it will be a significant challenge, but the potential implications of not changing our current trajectory could be much worse.

Better baseline health data and surveillance is needed to ascertain climate-related health impacts. We need to provide our public health workforce and future workforce with new and improved skills in how to identify, assess, prevent, address and respond to public health crises that we have so far not experienced on a massive scale. Leadership on this issue needs to be visible and unequivocal.

The bottom line: Will public health step up to the challenges? There is a role to play for all of us in this greatest challenge of our lives and that of our children, their children, and their children's children.

Are we up to the challenges? Hopefully, we are.

Nancy S. Partika, R.N., M.P.H., is co-chairperson of the Hawaii Climate Change and Health Working Group and immediate past-president of the Hawaii Public Health Association.
