

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 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 and water safety. In addition, the program works diligently to build partnerships to advance the field of environmental public health using unified messaging.

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 systems have experienced substantial restructuring and budget cuts, leaving them with insufficient human and financial resources. Important questions are raised about the agencies in which services are situated, how the community interacts with and accesses these systems, the requisites for an ideal system, non-governmental partners, and the most effective ways for various sectors to work together.

Children aged 0 to 8 years are 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 disadvantaged communities are disproportionately impacted. Children of color and children living in poverty, or very low-income housing bear a high burden of lead exposures, lead toxicity and other environmental hazards. However, it is unclear whether governmental public and environmental public health 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, ozone 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 scan the environmental public health systems in all 50 states to gain an understanding of ways they respond to the needs of young children. 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

The nation's 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 state of the environmental public health systems across the United States, particularly the ways they respond to the needs of young children. APHA seeks to illuminate lessons learned and share what's working in states/localities as well as what needs improvement.

Community Assessments/Case Studies

APHA also seeks to communicate what can be done to institutionalize these improvements. This will be accomplished by visiting select communities to learn about challenges with obtaining answers and services related to their health and their environment, as well as visits with health departments and departments of environmental quality to learn about their efforts and limitations. These meetings, along with the key informant interviews, will help identify gaps and common themes within the environmental public health system. The lessons learned will be used to identify recommendations and next steps for how to effectively build an environmental public health system that successfully serves the community in which it resides. The national scan will bring into focus the full scope of the challenge and spark a broader conversation. Additionally, APHA will spotlight local stories to illuminate the human impact and give greater, immediate value to the importance of strengthening environmental public health systems.

Contact

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