

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Creating Healthier Communities Through Health Impact Assessment

Policy

Health impact assessment (HIA) is commonly defined as “a combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.”¹ After years of practice and evaluation in Europe, HIA continues to be hailed as one of the most important new processes in public health, given its aim to influence decision making processes in an open, multi-disciplinary and structured way.² There is a burgeoning interest in applying HIA to land use/community design projects and policies in the U.S, which are primarily made at the local level.³ HIA has substantial potential to improve public health by bringing to the attention of decision makers, such as members of city councils and zoning commissions (who typically have little background in health), the health consequences of their actions.⁴

In order to increase application of HIA and to help build broader support for HIA, NACCHO supports and urges the following capacity building measures to advance utilization of HIA among local health departments:

- *Allocation of local, state, and federal funding* to provide local public health officials and planners with more resources to initiate or enhance implementation of HIA projects at the local level and to support a US based HIA research agenda.
- *Training and technical assistance* to assist local health officials gain an understanding of the scope and uses of HIA and to implement it into their work duties related to community planning. This also includes training or awareness building for the non-public health stakeholders who may be an integral part of the process.
- *Development of the necessary local quantitative and qualitative data* by collaborating with university partners, planners and community-based health organizations to provide weighted evidence to inform HIA and land use/community design policy decisions. The collection and dispersal of data is fundamental in helping health officials gain support for this work.
- *Collaboration with traditional and non-traditional partners* to elicit broad-based support of HIA, particularly elected officials and developers, whose support can advance work in preventing or mitigating negative health outcomes of planning decisions and further the process of institutionalizing HIA as a common practice.
- *Promotion of social justice and health equity* through utilization of HIA. HIA can be an appropriate tool to link the social determinants of health to land use policies, as well as through the development review process.

Justification

HIA offers considerable benefits that may advance the work of LHDs in meeting the Essential Services and improving the quality of life and health outcomes attributed to land use planning and community design decisions. While many LHDs have been involved in community design decisions through the development review process, this has only been at a very rudimentary level (e.g. inspections and permitting).⁵ HIA provides the opportunity for LHDs to expand their purview to address a broader range of public health considerations, such as eliminating health inequities and addressing other non-health sector issues that may impact the public's health. Additionally, HIAs may attend to the psychological, social, cultural, and at times spiritual health concerns that may result from a development project, zoning policies, etc. Rapid, intermediate, or more comprehensive HIAs can be undertaken, with varying levels of inputs and rigor, and utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. The decision to do a rapid vs. full HIA is also dependent on time, resources (both people and money), and available literature in the respective health outcomes being examined. Full or Comprehensive HIAs will require to LHDs utilize existing community networks and public education skills to address issues.

Overall, as demonstrated in Europe, HIA has the potential to assist the public health sector move toward the World Health Organization's definition of health whereby "...the effects on health of the broad physical and social environment, which includes housing, urban development, land-use and transportation, industry, and agriculture" are fully considered in all aspects of community design decisions. As the number of local health officials beginning to use HIA in their communities expands, it is critical to provide the necessary funding, guidance, and resources to advance U.S.-based HIA practices as a strategy for building healthier communities.

Record of Action

Proposed by Environmental Health Committee

Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors 01-26-06

¹ European Centre for Health Policy, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe. Gothenburg Consensus Paper. Health impact assessment: main concepts and suggested approach. Brussels, 1999. Available at: <http://www.who.dk/document/PAE/Gothenburgpaper.pdf>. Accessed November 10, 2005.

² Lock, Karen. Health Impact Assessment. BMJ. 2000; 320:1395. Available at: <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/320/7246/>. Accessed November 14, 2005.

³ National Association of County and City Health Officials. Focus group Report. Exploring the Role of Local Public Health Officials in Land Use Community Design. Washington, DC 2003

⁴ Dannenberg, AL, Bhatia, R, Cole, BL et al. Growing the Field of Health Impact Assessment in The United States: An Agenda for Research and Practice. Am J Public Health 2006; xx:xx

⁵ idem