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 HIAs are one approach that can be used to bring about Health in All Policies (HiAP) at the state and local levels. At the local level, HiAP could be achieved through the institutionalization of HIA. For example, HiAP can be achieved by opening an office of HIA that continually screens new policies, programs, and projects; conducting HIAs on those determined to be of sufficient import; disseminating a HIA report with sufficient time to shape the final policy before implementation; and monitoring implementation as needed.²

The National Association of County and City Health Officials recommends:

Federal, state, and local governments should:

- Promote the standardization of the HIA process for local health departments across the U.S.;
- Support conducting HIAs on national policies (e.g. Affordable Care Act) and policies implemented on state and local levels, but also have a national impact (e.g. hydraulic fracturing);
- Support the institutionalization of HIA through the provision of funding, training, technical assistance, data development, and collaboration between traditional and non-traditional partners;
- Support HIA mentorship and peer learning among LHDs, planners, and local government agencies;
- Encourage hospitals, where appropriate, to dedicate funds set aside for community health needs assessments as mandated by the Patient Protection and Affordable care Act for HIAs;
- Support the promotion of social justice and health equity within communities through the utilization of HIA.

Local health departments should:

- Support close collaborations between local government agencies and communities around HIAs on various community planning, regulations, and design of new development and redevelopment,
- Encourage local planning divisions to incorporate HIAs into community design processes to promote and protect the health of communities.

**Justification**

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. 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 and to policies implemented at the state and local levels that have a nation impact, including hydraulic fracturing. HIA has substantial potential to improve public health as a tool used to address HiAP at the state and local levels 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.

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 HiAP, 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). 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 LHDs to utilize existing community networks and public education skills to address issues.

With the passage of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, non-profit hospitals are being called to increase their accountability to the communities they serve. Provision of funding is needed to provide HIA training, technical assistance, and data development in communities. Non-profit hospitals should be encouraged to work with LHDs where appropriate in supporting and conducting HIAs in their communities as part of their effort to fulfill community benefit requirements.

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*


