

Bernalillo County, NM
Environmental Health Report Card, 2001



The Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Environmental Health Report Card is the result of a two-year collaborative process, with input from a multi-jurisdictional Advisory Committee. Its purpose is to inform community members, policy makers, and other decision-makers of environmental health status and conditions. The Report Card is essentially an information tool and tracking device, necessary to direct future work of the Bernalillo County Office of Environmental Health.

Tasks from the *Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH)* were used as a guide for developing the Report Card. *PACE EH* offered local health officials comprehensive guidance in conducting a community-based environmental health assessment and evaluating the environmental health status of their community. At the outset of each Advisory Committee meeting, the steps involved in developing the Report Card were compared to the tasks outlined in the *PACE EH* document to ensure that there were no evident gaps in the process. Bernalillo County Office of Environmental Health worked with the Assessment Protocol for Excellence in Public Health (*APEX PH*) during the 1990s. Its decision to rely on *PACE EH*, beginning in 1999, developed partly out of its Turning Point initiative, which in its later stages concentrated on environmental health issues, as well as a decision to produce an Environmental Health Report Card for the county.



Background

Bernalillo County, New Mexico stretches from the East Mountain area (just north of the Sandia Mountains) to the Volcano Cliffs on the west mesa. The County consists of nearly 1200 square miles and over 556,678 people, a 16% increase from 1990. While some of this growth was beneficial, concerns persist about the production of pollutants, particularly air quality. The Hispanic population constitutes 42% (233,565) of the total. Per capita personal income as of 1999 was \$27,287, but has increased substantially since then. The poverty rate, estimated for all ages is 14.6%. Unemployment is at 3.2%.

New Mexico has a central state health office, as well as an environmental department. Locally, there are 50 public health offices. But only two other agencies and Native American jurisdictions in the state have responsibility for environmental health: the city of Albuquerque and Bernalillo County. An Environmental Health Report Card Advisory Committee selected experts from across the state and Bernalillo County, including decision makers, academicians, and representatives from non-profit organizations. In the early phases, the community was not involved. Community people were present, but they worked in agencies.

The first step included a short assessment, using a survey questionnaire at the annual environmental health conference, which is held each year. Participants were asked to identify issues. Second, conferences were conducted with neighborhoods at which



community leaders identified the issues. An annual report published by the state of New Mexico entitled *State of Health in New Mexico* (started in 1998) contains a section on environmental health, which the team also used for part of its issue generation process. The point was to provide an opportunity for both professionals and the community to make their issues known, first

countywide and then at the neighborhood level.

Using a matrix for each issue (sources; pollutants; exposure; environmental indicators; health risk/population at risk; health indicators; other outcomes; recommended actions for community and government) and including the following issues (air quality; food safety; drinking water quality; surface water quality; water quantity; solid waste; and vector borne diseases) the assessment relied on both health and environmental indicators from multiple sources. These were derived both from expert and nationally known surveillance sources and professional organizations or agencies with the appropriate data, as well as what community members understood or experienced, e.g. brown cloud, fog, need to take sick days from work for asthma, bad smells, or what was visible. For example, for air quality they relied on the Air Quality Index and the criteria that included carbon monoxide, ozone, coarse particulate matter and fine particulate matter. (Some difficulties occurred in determining the most appropriate data for capturing the meaning of indicators for things like air quality.) For food safety, they relied on cases of potential food-borne illnesses in Albuquerque and Bernalillo County; for solid waste they examined residential solid waste history over four years; and for vector borne diseases they determined the number of cases of human plague over time.

After completion of the Environmental Health Report Card for the City of Albuquerque and Bernalillo County, the Report Card was distributed widely. Because there were not staff or resources, the project, including next iterations for all four quadrants, has been only concentrated in one quadrant of the county, the South Valley. The Report Card presents plans for each of the issues and recommends actions for government agencies, community organizations and residents.

The Environmental Report Card was devised for the entire county. But the next plan of action is to develop a report card in four geographic areas, to make it more community based. The expectation is that the Report Card will serve as the basis for work on the specific issues. Thus, if air quality was chosen, a decision would be made about what

each group/agency could do through attending meetings, influencing policy, advising behavior change and institutional change and so forth, including workplaces, schools, and environments.

For more information about the Bernalillo Report Card see:

http://www.bernco.gov/upload/images/environmental_health/reportcard.pdf