

Calhoun County, Alabama

PACE EH Project



2001-2004

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since 2001 the National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO) has been working in collaboration with the National Center for Environmental Health of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (NCEH/CDC) to provide financial support, track and monitor progress, and provide technical assistance to the Calhoun County (AL) Health Department to implement the *PACE EH (Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health)* methodology. The lessons this community learns conducting the assessment process are, and will continue to be, of great benefit to NACCHO and NCEH/CDC in identifying the need for future activities to support local implementation efforts, as well as to peer communities that wish to undertake *PACE EH* and can build on Calhoun County's successes and challenges.

PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Tasks 1- 3: Preparing for the Process (February 2002 – September 2002)

Calhoun County Health Department began its *PACE EH* project in earnest in early April 2002. Although the department had begun developing its project many months earlier, it was then that Donald Bain (Asst. Area Administrator, Alabama Department of Public Health) and Timothy Cherry (Calhoun County *PACE EH* Coordinator) publicly launched the initiative during an informal community meeting.

Over the next three months they focused on recruiting a viable CEHA team, and building support for the effort throughout the community by visiting a number of ongoing community forums and meetings of local special interest groups.

From the outset, and thanks to a long and well-chronicled history of local awareness of chronic poor health in the community, caused by PCB pollution during the 1960s, Mr. Cherry determined that local support, though hard to develop was crucial to ensure the Calhoun County *PACE EH* initiative's long-term success.

Mr. Cherry's monthly reports from July 2002 through September 2002 illustrate the great lengths he devoted to recruiting broad community representation on the CEHA team. He also spent an inordinate amount of time promoting the project goals and objectives by holding a series of local forums designed to garner support from the Anniston community at large.

Tasks 4 and 5: Identifying the Issues (October 2002 – May 2004)

The Anniston, Alabama *PACE EH* facilitators spent 19 months on the two objectives described above. There were a number of stops and starts during this period, caused by personnel changes, personal emergencies, flagging CEHA team commitment and the need to go back, revisit and rework previously completed tasks.

During this time period two unforeseen events hampered the *PACE EH* facilitator's work. First, in early 2003, the lead facilitator became ill and needed to take time off to fully recuperate. Then, the lead facilitator resigned and a new lead facilitator had to be brought up to speed from December 2003 to January 2004.

A high team-member dropout rate and the need to revisit "completed" tasks, involving further discussion and new action also hampered progress. Both factors may be linked to Anniston's history as a socio-geographic victim of extensive industrial pollution and widespread community knowledge of harmful health effects of pollutants in local waterways.

The initial facilitator of the *PACE EH* project noted that, throughout his tenure CEHA team members were routinely left under the impression that the project was another of many previous attempts by local and state government agencies to placate community members without fully addressing identified environmental problems. This perception was exacerbated by the facilitators' struggle to ensure unanimous endorsement by the CEHA team of results from *PACE EH* tasks. Contentious, and under-attended, team meetings, steeped in relative distrust between community members, the state and county health departments, and local business interests too often resulted in failure to complete one task and move on to the next.

In February of 2003, the Anniston CEHA team decided that Task 4 would need to be completed in two distinct phases occurring approximately six months apart. They decided to formalize an initial set of goals followed by the distribution of community perception surveys. They also decided to formally revisit those goals as the assessment process evolved, and as a list of environmental health issues began to emerge from community surveys.

The Anniston CEHA team divided Task 5 into three distinct phases. In the first phase (December 2002) the team developed a broad list of county environmental health issues. The second phase involved identification of community environmental health issues through informal surveys and the Anniston Photovoice project (see box). The third phase was designed to produce a single set of environmental health issues that represented both CEHA team and community members' primary issues. Phases two and three took place in June and July 2003.

THE ANNISTON PHOTOVOICE PROJECT

To assist in the collection of community perceptions of local environmental health concerns, the Calhoun County CEHA team facilitated the Photovoice project. The project was designed to give Calhoun County residents the opportunity to express their views on their living and working environments. Project volunteer photographers took photographs of aspects of their environments which they deemed positive and worth maintaining, and those they deemed negative and in need of remediation. For each picture, the volunteer photographers wrote descriptions of, and explanations for, their selection. The pictures were collected and compiled into a report for the Calhoun County CEHA team.

The first iteration of community perception survey results identified the following five priority environmental health concerns (based on approximately 782 completed surveys):

- 1. Safe drinking water**
- 2. Industrial chemicals and pollutants**
- 3. Residential chemicals and poisons**
- 4. Outdoor air quality**
- 5. Food safety**

After completing their analysis and initial priority setting, the Calhoun County CEHA team decided the data it had collected was not extensive enough to warrant beginning Task VI of the *PACE EH* methodology and decided to draft and distribute additional assessment tools. To that end, working with expert assistance from the University of Alabama-Birmingham, the Calhoun County CEHA team formed an Assessment Committee charged with analyzing examples of assessment tools employed by *PACE EH* sites across the United States. The Assessment Committee has identified a sample survey tool used by the Delaware, Ohio *PACE EH* pilot site as the model it will probably adapt for its own use.

However, late in 2004, the team decided that further surveying was not necessary, and that Task V was complete. The participants shelved the plan to conduct additional issue identification surveying in favor of more extensive research and data collection on the identified issues. The *PACE EH* facilitator focused team attention on identifying and interviewing experts with knowledge of the local priority environmental health concerns.

NEXT STEPS

Tasks VI and VII will be addressed between January and March, 2005. The CEHA team intends to use future team meetings to graph the information from the surveys and to use it to discuss the development of consensus indicators to represent the priority environmental health issues.

The Calhoun County CEHA team is planning on completing its *PACE EH* work by June 2005.

More Information

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