

07-09

STATEMENT OF POLICY

Health Effects of Climate Change

Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) strongly urges all levels of government to collaborate with community stakeholders on preparing for and responding to climate change. NACCHO urges the public health community to provide strong leadership in climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts. Local health departments should act to reduce the severity of climate change-related health impacts.

Local health departments, in partnership with state and federal public health agencies, must immediately prepare for the impacts of climate change on public health. NACCHO urges public health departments to promote and participate in climate change mitigation efforts, which may include (1) the incorporation of adaptation planning into land use, housing, and transportation design; (2) preparing communities for extreme environmental events; and (3) coordinating with local governments on all-hazards disaster planning. Local health departments should aim to prepare communities to adapt to a changing climate.

The impacts of climate change are likely to be complex, to vary geographically, and to affect specific populations differently. The 10 Essential Public Health Services provides a framework for understanding how local health departments can understand and act on climate change.¹ NACCHO recommends that local health departments engage in the following activities to address the health impacts.

Essential Public Health Service 1: Monitor health status to identify and solve community health problems.

- Conduct risk and vulnerability assessments. Particular attention must be given to identifying the most vulnerable populations for different hazards (e.g., extreme weather events).
- Conduct comprehensive surveillance during extreme events such as floods, heat waves, and wildfires.

Essential Public Health Service 2: Diagnose and investigate health problems and health hazards in the community.

- Conduct routine monitoring of environmental conditions alongside disease surveillance.
- Enhance surveillance of climate sensitive diseases (e.g., vector-borne diseases, illnesses impacted by air quality).
- Design and implement early warning systems related to climate impacts such as drought and vector-borne disease.



Essential Public Health Service 3: Inform, educate, and empower people about health issues.

- Institute continuous, science-based, and culturally competent education programs to inform policymakers, communities, and local health department staff on the health impacts of climate change.
- Articulate the causal pathways by which climate change impacts health.
- Identify health benefits of mitigation activities such as active transportation and local food production.

Essential Public Health Service 4: Mobilize community partnerships and action to identify and solve health problems.

- Advocate for policies, plans, programs, and resources to support climate change mitigation and adaptation, emphasizing scientific evidence and equity.
- Build partnerships with key local stakeholders to engage and enlist them in the response to climate change.
- Integrate climate change into emergency preparedness plans.

Essential Public Health Service 5: Develop policies and plans that support individual and community health efforts.

- Develop local climate change mitigation and adaptation plans that address the health impacts of climate change.
- Design evidence-based intervention models that reduce negative health impacts and prepare jurisdictions for a changing climate.
- Collaborate with local stakeholders to develop preparedness and response plans for extreme weather events.
- Work with policymakers to introduce a public health perspective into public policy developed around climate change.

Essential Public Health Service 6: Enforce laws and regulations that protect health and ensure safety.

- Use environmental health regulatory activities and authorities to protect the public's health from climate change (e.g., limit outdoor activities when the heat index or smoke from wildfires pose significant risk to the public).

Essential Public Health Service 7: Link people to needed personal health services and ensure the provision of healthcare when otherwise unavailable.

- Plan for and ensure continuity of healthcare services during extreme events like flooding and wildfires.

Essential Public Health Service 8: Assure competent public and personal health care workforce.

- Provide opportunities to educate and train public health leadership and the public health workforce on the health effects of climate change.

Essential Public Health Service 9: Evaluate effectiveness, accessibility, and quality of personal and population-based health services.

- Contribute to the evidence base by evaluating mitigation and adaptation interventions.

Essential Public Health Service 10: Research for new insights and innovative solutions to health problems.

- Participate in scientifically based research programs related to climate change that readily translate to the practice of public health.
- Support research on emerging health impacts related to climate change and public health best practice standards.

Justification

Climate change has serious and far-reaching health implications for present and future generations.² Climate change can be expected to have both direct and indirect impacts on human health. An example of a direct impact would be the exacerbation of respiratory conditions and allergies due to air pollution. For example, poor air quality increases ground-level ozone, which has been documented to exacerbate asthma, resulting in increased incidence of “asthma-related hospital visits and premature deaths.”³ An indirect impact would be increases in the risk from vector-borne infectious disease.⁴ Climate change is already changing the distribution of some infectious disease vectors.³

More intense and more frequent weather events may result in the most serious health impacts of climate change, threatening to “increase the number of people suffering from death, disease and injury from heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts.”³ Climate change may also cause social disruption, economic decline, and displacement of populations, all of which may substantially impact health.⁵ Moreover, the health risks associated with climate change will not be shared equally among individuals, communities, and populations. Climate change will disproportionately burden the very young, older adults, people living with mental and physical disabilities, low-income people, and marginalized communities.⁴ Climate change will also exacerbate problems of social and environmental justice.⁵

In order to reduce the negative health impacts of climate change, the local public health system must be prepared to address the present and future challenges of climate change. However, many local health departments are not adequately prepared to meet these challenges.⁶ NACCHO recognizes that local health department capacity to engage climate change must be improved. The first step to increasing capacity is to instill in stakeholders and the public that climate change is happening now and that the effects will be felt domestically, at the local level. Increased understanding will result in increased support for the allocation of resources and time to climate change impact mitigation, enabling local health departments to prioritize climate change preparedness.

References

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Record of Action

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