

Building Capacity to Advance Health Equity and Environmental Justice in Choose Safe Places



Choose Safe Places
for Early Care and Education
Planning. Guidance. Protection.

Introduction

[Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education \(CSPECE\)](#), is a program supported by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR). State health departments receive support to implement activities to ensure that potential early care and education (ECE) facilities are located in safe and healthy environments for children to grow, learn, and thrive. Beginning with 25 states health departments in 2017, CSPECE has since expanded to 28 states that focus their efforts on promoting safe siting of ECE programs in areas free of environmental hazards.¹ Given these activities, and the complex nature of addressing environmental health concerns, health equity and environmental justice are key initiatives to consider within CSPECE programs.



Health equity, as defined by Dr. Camara Jones, is “the assurance of the conditions for optimal health for all people. Achieving health equity requires valuing all individuals and populations equally, recognizing and rectifying historical injustices, and providing resources according to need.”² Health equity strives to provide people with what they need to achieve their best possible outcome by removing the barriers that prevent people from attaining their best health outcome.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), environmental justice is the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.”⁴ One example is the Flint Water Crisis as the decision to switch the city’s water source to the Flint River to save money resulted in lead-contaminated drinking water disproportionately impacting Black communities.⁵ It is important to note that this is one example as environmental justice efforts encompass the whole ecosystem, including food access, air and water quality, land use, and climate.

These initiatives call for fairness. Note that fair does not mean equal; it means that everyone has what they need to achieve their optimal outcome. In terms of environmental justice, fairness means “that no group of people should bear a disproportionate share of the negative environmental consequences resulting from industrial, governmental, and commercial operations or policies.”⁴ For example, offering CSPECE educational materials tailored to meet the language needs of a community is an example of fairness. While not equal, it is fair because everyone now has what they need to participate and make decisions for themselves.

Advancing health equity and environmental justice ensures that people who are impacted by a decision, policy, and/or

program are included in activities that address their health and environment. It also focuses the attention of programs on structural problems rather than individuals and their behaviors.

It is important to consider health equity and environmental justice in CSPECE because not all communities and jurisdictions where ECE facilities are located are the same. There is historical and social context that has impacted the environmental concerns that CSPECE wants to address. One example of a historical practice that continues to impact environmental health and the built environment is redlining, which took place in the 1930s. Redlining is a discriminatory practice that denied financial services, like mortgages, to neighborhoods based on race and ethnicity and contributed to the development of areas that are associated with disproportionate environmental burdens today.⁶ For example, highways, refineries, and other known polluters were placed near Black and low-income communities of color. Today, people of color including Black, Hispanic, and Asian individuals are exposed to more pollution from emission sources such as oil refineries, agriculture, vehicles, construction, and restaurants compared to white people.⁷ Due to practices like redlining and policies such as siting, zoning, and licensing, children are also impacted by increased exposures to pollution and therefore it is especially important to consider environmental justice in CSPECE programs.

Building Capacity to Advance Health Equity and Environmental Justice

To start advancing health equity and environmental justice efforts in CSPECE programs, it is important to understand the capacity to advance these conditions. [Benchmarking tools](#) can help identify strengths and needs for advancing health equity and environmental justice initiatives. Complete the table as a team to ensure that all perspectives are represented.

With this understanding of capacity, the next step is to identify a starting point. Perhaps, there is a metric where there is momentum that the team can build on, or there is a metric where more resources are needed, and the team wants to address it first.

Tools to Support Environmental Justice Initiatives

If training and knowledge building around health equity and environmental justice are needed, NACCHO's [Roots of Health Inequity](#) course and its [supplemental handbook](#) are two great places to start. The Roots of Health Inequity course is an educational website and collaborative learning course for current and future public health professionals and their partners. It addresses and examines the root causes of health inequities and offers insight to help transform public health practice. In turn, practitioners can work towards the elimination of health inequities by acting directly on root causes.

The sixth and final unit of the Roots of Health Inequity course highlights Narrative. To accompany this unit, NACCHO created a handbook, titled "Advancing Public Narrative for Health Equity and Social Justice." This handbook provides guidance in identifying, examining, and countering dominant public narratives and the systems that support them. Relying on examples, exercises, and questions for reflection and dialogue, this resource supports public health practitioners and their allies in becoming effective messengers and advocates, as they strive to achieve health equity. The handbook also offers insights to promote a social justice-based public narrative, which refers to commonly held beliefs based on stories, culture, social rules, media, and representation, to realize a more equitable and socially just society by engaging people in collective action. It is recommended for use in a facilitated dialogue process.

A key element in the EPA's definition of environmental justice is "meaningful involvement of all people" which highlights the need for active community engagement.⁴ To build capacity to address the long-term effects of health inequities and environmental injustices, it is important imperative to reach out and build relationships with community members, community-based organizations, subject matter experts, and other agencies that may be working to advance these initiatives. These organizations and individuals have been on the frontlines of environmental justice, health equity, and children's environmental health for decades. They have the best understanding and knowledge of their communities and their needs. Health equity and environmental justice work is not new, and rather than create something new,

programs can join forces with those who have been doing this work. CSPECE programs can consider inviting them to join an advisory board or create another decision-making mechanism to ensure that multiple perspectives are present and that those who are most impacted by these activities have input in the process.

In addition to engaging local community-based organizations, the following organizations have resources to support environmental justice:

- [Trust for Public Lands](#)
- [Healthy Schools Network](#)
- [WE ACT](#)
- [The Chisholm Legacy Project](#)

The EPA has a [tool to identify](#) local and state level environmental justice initiatives, and the [National Conference of State Legislatures lists state and federal environmental justice efforts](#) through policy and legislation. These tools can be used to identify commissions and offices that are charged with advancing environmental justice to, not only partner, but also serve as model practices to advance these important initiatives.

The EPA [also has a series to support building capacity to address environmental justice work](#). It includes webinars and workshops on different themes such as data collection and accessing funding for community initiatives.

There are several tools that show different health outcomes and various environmental metrics by neighborhood and map them to whether the neighborhoods were redlined. The RAND Corporation, a public policy research agency, is [one such tool](#).

Another tool to identify communities experiencing high environmental burden and to prioritize communities for policies and interventions designed to reduce inequities is the [Environmental Justice Index \(EJI\)](#). The EJI is the first nationwide index designed to address cumulative impacts through the lens of environmental justice and health equity. This tool uses data from a variety of sources, including the U.S. Census Bureau, the U.S. EPA, the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “to rank the cumulative impacts of environmental injustice on health for every census tract.”⁸ A variety of [indicators](#) were used in developing the EJI, and CSPECE programs may be most interested in the environmental burden module. The tool can provide additional information for CSPECE programs looking to incorporate health equity into their activities by identifying areas that may have greater needs. It is important to note that this tool does not characterize all environmental justice issues, does not represent risk or exposure for a community, nor does it provide a comprehensive view of all social, environmental, or health characteristics of a community. For more information, please see the [Environmental Justice Index Technical Documentation](#) and [Fact Sheet](#).

Resources

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