

# Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education: Massachusetts Environmental Justice Case Study



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The [Massachusetts \(MA\) Department of Public Health's Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education Program](#) utilized the MA DPH [Environmental Justice \(EJ\) Tool](#) to identify EJ communities within a pilot region in Southeast MA. EJ communities are defined as those meeting one or more criteria for median household income, neighborhood race and ethnicity makeup, and English language isolation. EJ communities in MA were found to have a disproportionate concentration of contaminated sites. These EJ regions will receive greater Choose Safe Places outreach and resources.



## Why Focus on EJ Communities?

Children are particularly sensitive to harmful chemicals and EJ neighborhoods are burdened by environmental pollution. The MA case study showed that EJ neighborhoods make up just 5% of the land area in MA's Southeast region. However, it is home to 20% of the population, 25% of children under the age of 5 years, and 30% of regulated contaminated sites. The increased burden of contaminated sites within EJ neighborhoods creates a challenge for safe siting of childcare programs. The higher density of contaminated sites means that locations of childcare programs are more likely to be impacted by contamination from previous activities. The Choose Safe Places program can provide a key service to prevent or minimize environmental exposures to children at childcare programs due to poor siting.

For example, the MA Choose Safe Places program evaluated a childcare program in an EJ area where industrial waste was dumped before homes were built. The state environmental protection agency tested surface soil at the childcare facility as part of its investigation into the contamination. Some soil samples had high levels of arsenic, lead, PCBs, and other toxic chemicals. The MA Choose Safe Places program reviewed the soil sampling data and determined there was no current risk of exposure and no health risks for children and staff based on the location of the contaminated soil. Recommendations were given to the childcare provider to properly maintain layers of pea gravel and wood chips, not allow children to dig through those layers in the play yard, and make sure children wash their hands after being outside. The Choose Safe Places program was also available to answer questions from staff and parents.

To learn more, see the poster on [The Intersection of Environmental Justice and the Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education Pilot Program in Southeastern Massachusetts](#) available on the MA Environmental Public Health Tracking website.

## How is EJ Incorporated into MA Choose Safe Places Activities?

When MA's Choose Safe Places for Early Care and Education Program receives a request for assistance, they use the

DPH EJ Tool to identify if the childcare facility is located in an EJ neighborhood. This helps MA prioritize childcare programs that are more likely to be located near contaminated sites and allocate resources accordingly. MA plans to focus future safe siting outreach efforts on EJ communities. This will allow the MA Choose Safe Places program to direct more resources to areas that need them most.

## Partners

Partners included the [MA Department of Early Education and Care \(EEC\)](#) and the [MA Environmental Public Health Tracking Program](#) (EPHT).

As the licensing agency for childcare facilities in Massachusetts, MA EEC promotes Choose Safe Places to childcare providers, connects the MA Choose Safe Places program to childcare providers when there is an environmental concern, and reviews and communicates MA Choose Safe Places program's recommendations to childcare providers.

The MA EPHT program supports the MA Choose Safe Places program by developing and maintaining the MA DPH EJ Tool and providing information about Choose Safe Places on their website.

## Existing State Policy/Resources

Environmental Justice is the principle that all people have the right to be protected from environmental hazards, and to live in and enjoy a clean, healthy environment. The Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EOEEA) established a statewide [Environmental Justice \(EJ\) Policy](#) in 2002 (and updated in 2021) to help address the disproportionate environmental burdens experienced by individuals of color and lower-income people. The DPH EJ tool is an interactive online tool to view EJ criteria data visualizations for cities and towns across Massachusetts. The DPH EJ Tool was developed by the MA Environmental Health Public Health Tracking program with funding from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Additional funding—beyond Choose Safe Place support—has made the above-mentioned activities possible.

## Future Choose Safe Places Work & Environmental Justice

It takes time and solid collaborative partnerships with other state or regional organizations supporting early care and education facilities (i.e., Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), licensing, Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agencies and state networks) for state health departments to develop and implement their Choose Safe Places programs. Currently, states are at varying stages of project development (e.g., partner outreach, data collection, full implementation) --some are prepared to engage with EJ communities (e.g., MA), and others are not quite as ready. Meaningful engagement with populations at risk or environmental justice communities takes dedicated effort and time.

Best practices for working with environmental justice communities include soliciting guidance and input from the people most impacted prior to developing resources and outreach plans. Additionally, another necessary best practice includes working with trusted community organizations to get the word out about program activities and resources.

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