

The Value of Health Impact Assessment to Community Partners



Overview

The purpose of this document is to explain how health impact assessment (HIA) is a valuable tool for community health, relationship development and community engagement, a variety of policy sectors, sustainability, and economic growth.

Health impact assessment: A systematic process that uses an array of data sources and analytic methods and considers input from stakeholders to determine the potential effects of a proposed policy, plan, program, or project on the health of a population and the distribution of those effects within the population. HIA provides recommendations for managing and monitoring those effects.¹



Health: A Shared Value

Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. As a society, we spend a tremendous amount of money on healthcare instead of investing in preventive measures that can keep us healthy in the first place. HIA examines the relationship of our health to those conditions in which we are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of our daily life. These conditions are the most important determinants of health. However, they cannot be addressed by health policymakers alone. They must be addressed collaboratively with policymakers in sectors outside the realm of public health.



Building Relationships

HIA encourages community and promotes equity. The HIA process facilitates meaningful discussion of issues and helps build relationships that persist beyond the completion of a single HIA. These relationships and collaborations can extend across communities. Engaging community members in decisions that can affect their health and well-being provides the valuable opportunity of integrating community knowledge, insights, and leadership into the public decision-making processes.



Adaptability

HIA can be adapted to suit many campaigns or decision-making processes. The scope and scale of HIA are adaptable. HIAs can be flexible in the breadth of the potential impacts that can be examined, time and resources spent, research methods employed, and the engagement of stakeholders and the public. HIA can be a basic analysis of available data focused on one health outcome or a comprehensive analysis of new data using quantitative and qualitative methods. This means that HIA can be utilized regardless of resource limitations.



Sustainability

HIA assesses the short- and long-term impacts of decisions to mitigate negative health outcomes. Certain impacts are to be expected while others, often less obvious, are unintended. For example, short-term impacts of a commuter roadway expansion might include increased air pollution and traffic accidents while the longer term impact of the policy might include greater dependence on cars and reduced physical activity levels, leading to a higher rate of obesity and chronic disease. HIA practitioners can identify elements that might prove unsustainable over time and provide recommendations to protect the well-being of the community. The HIA process can strengthen economic, environmental and organizational sustainability.

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Economic Growth

A healthy population leads to a healthy economy. Investment in training, education, and health promotion is indispensable for professional growth. Health and well-being cultivate both human capital and economic growth. HIAs can examine the potential effects of economic development plans and policy changes on the health of the community. The set of recommendations generated will help promote a robust economy by supporting population health.

References

1. National Research Council (US) Committee on Health Impact Assessment. (2011). Improving Health in the United States: The Role of Health Impact Assessment. Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

Acknowledgments

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For more information about HIA, visit NACCHO's HIA webpage at <http://www.naccho.org/programs/community-health/healthy-community-design/health-impact-assessment>.

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