

Climate Change Demonstration Site: Mercer County (IL) Health Department



NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE:

Mercer County (IL) Health Department

NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE PROJECT:

Climate Change and Rural Communities Project

Project Summary

The goal of the Climate Change and Rural Communities project was to address the public health and long-term consequences of climate change in the community by building a coalition (the Mercer County Climate Change Action Committee) representing local, regional, and state partners to conduct a needs assessment, provide community education, and train local health department (LHD) staff. The project was planned and implemented in three main sections—training, education, and needs assessment/strategic planning.

For training, three climate change trainings were planned. The Mercer County Health Department (MCHD) identified speakers to present information relevant to extreme weather, climate change, and direct links to rural communities. The trainings were presented to LHD staff, community partners, Mercer County Board of Health members, and Mercer County Climate Change Action Committee (CCAC) members. The first training was on the most common severe weather events that occur in Mercer County and surrounding areas and trends that are likely to occur with further climate change. The second training was on the impacts of floods and droughts (and other hazards) that directly affect Mercer County and how they relate directly to agriculture and valuable resources like water and soil. The final training was on the diversity in climate change issues seen in urban and rural locations in Illinois.

For education, five posters were developed and presented at events such as flood recovery fairs, the National Association of County and City Health Officials' (NACCHO's) Annual Conference, health fairs, church events, emergency preparedness exercises, emergency responder meetings, and county fairs.



The poster topics are as follows:

- **General Climate Change:** Provides definitions of climate and climate change and the Mercer County Climate Change and Rural Communities' project goal and objectives.
- **Extreme Weather (Flood):** Lists the public health response to flooding and the public health effects of flooding. Pictures and statistics from flooding in Mercer County are provided.
- **Extreme Weather (Tornado and Thunderstorm/Wind Events):** Lists the public health response to tornadoes and thunderstorm/wind events and their effects on public health. Pictures and statistics from storms in Mercer County are provided.
- **Extreme Weather (Winter Storms):** Lists the public health response to winter storms and the public health effects from winter storms in Mercer County. Pictures and statistics from winter storms in Mercer County are also provided.
- **Target Groups:** Six target sectors identified by the CCAC as likely to be most affected by extreme weather events are listed, along with the severe weather impacts associated with each target sector.

For the needs assessment/strategic plan, the CCAC was formed and met frequently to conduct the needs assessment. The group used the following process:



Through this process, the following target sectors were identified that would be most affected by extreme weather events: Agriculture; Health/Medical; Transportation; Natural Resources; Emergency Response; and Vulnerable Populations. The CCAC then identified risk factors and direct/indirect contributing factors for each target sector. Once this was completed, the CCAC identified the impacts made by extreme weather regarding health and safety and prioritized them according to frequency, severity, and ability to effect change. The CCAC then identified and categorized strategies according to the following systems: Equipment; Process; People; Materials; Environment; and Management.

Once the process was complete, the data were entered into the Mercer County Climate Adaptation Plan, the end result of the Climate Change and Rural Communities project. Visit NACCHO's Climate Change Toolkit to access the Mercer County Climate Adaptation Plan and learn more.

The project increased the knowledge base of MCHD staff and community partners regarding the public health and long-term consequences of climate change.

Project Outcomes

Through this project, MCHD was able to effectively promote increased coordination and communication between the different sectors and agencies involved in addressing public health consequences of climate change. Community partners had little or no communication regarding climate change or extreme weather events prior to the formation of the CCAC. For example, if partners were addressing climate change within their own agencies, they might not have been sharing that information with partners. The CCAC was the first organized approach to climate change in Mercer County.

The following sectors and agencies were involved in the CCAC:

- Aledo Police Department
- Community Bible Fellowship Church
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- Mercer County Board
- Mercer County Emergency Management Agency
- Mercer County Farm Bureau
- Mercer County Health Department
- Mercer County Hospital
- Mercer County Nursing Home
- Mercer County Sheriff's Department
- National Weather Service
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- University of Illinois Extension
- Viola Police Department

MCHD was able to gauge its ability to address the public health consequences of climate change and identify knowledge base and capacity gaps among key partners. The CCAC, chaired by MCHD, conducted a county-wide needs assessment. Through the needs assessment, strategies were identified to improve the response to severe weather or improve the current processes used to lessen the effects of climate change. Gaps identified in prioritizing impacts and strategies included lack of funding, lack of staff in a rural community, and lack of community-wide education. CCAC members also received the project's three climate change trainings to enable a more educated approach to the assessment process.

The project increased the knowledge base of MCHD staff and community partners regarding the public health and long-term consequences of climate change. All LHD staff were trained in severe weather and the impacts of severe weather on Mercer County and the state of Illinois. Specific natural resources such as soil and water were also addressed due to the agricultural nature of Mercer County.

Community Partners

The following community partners received climate change training:

- Advanced Medical Transport
- Aledo Fire and Police Departments
- Aledo Times Record newspaper
- City of Aledo officials
- Community Bible Fellowship Church
- Henderson County Health Department
- Illinois Department of Transportation
- Illinois State Representative
- Mercer County Board
- Mercer County Emergency Management Agency
- Mercer County Farm Bureau
- Mercer County Health Department
- Mercer County Hospital
- Mercer County Nursing Home
- Mercer County Sheriff's Department
- Mercer County Emergency Management Agency
- Natural Resources Conservation Service
- National Weather Service
- New Boston city officials
- North Henderson city officials
- Rock Island County Health Department
- University of Illinois Extension
- Viola Police Department
- Warren County Health Department
- WRMJ Radio

MCHD produced a series of posters that identified the public health responses to severe weather events including flooding, thunderstorm and tornado/wind events, and winter storms. Specific public health responses to severe weather included emergency response coordination, cooling centers, food and water safety, evacuation/temporary shelter, meal sites, alternate overflow hospital sites, sanitation issues, and emergency responder safety. The posters were shared with LHD staff, CCAC members, Mercer County Board of Health members, community partners, the public, and attendees of the 2010 NACCHO Annual Conference.

The posters also identified the public health effects of severe weather, including the possibility of increased transmission of communicable disease due to contaminated water supply, drowning and injuries or trauma, respiratory tract infections (mold), injuries and deaths related to fire, electrocution, explosion, crushing and punctures, power outages (limited communication systems), potential food and water shortage, interruption of emergency services, downed power lines and trees, structural damage, and the decreased availability of emergency workers or equipment.

Finally, Mercer County was also able to develop a strategic plan for the community regarding climate change. The Mercer County Climate Adaptation Plan was written as a result of the needs assessment process. The needs assessment identified strategies to reduce these public health and long-term consequences of climate change in the community.

The Mercer County Climate Adaptation Plan is available in NACCHO's Climate Change Toolkit at <http://bit.ly/LbvG0j>.

Stories from the Field

- The CCAC worked tirelessly on the Mercer County Climate Change Needs Assessment. In a show of support for the program and to recognize the efforts of the committee members, Illinois Representative Patrick J. Verschoore, 72nd District, gave them certificates of appreciation. The Aledo Times Record ran a picture and article about the awards presentation. Representative Verschoore also participated in the National Weather Service Extreme Weather training.
- Due to the Mercer County Climate Change and Rural Communities project, a partnership has been formed with the faith-based community. A pastor from a local church is an active CCAC member. This pastor has focused on response to extreme weather events and how the congregation can be more self-sufficient. Examples include collecting rain water for emergency use and stockpiling food and medications for a three-month emergency supply. The pastor, who had many good ideas, is invested in the continuation of the program beyond the funding cycle.
- The MCHD Mercer County Flood Assistance Program, in partnership with the Illinois Disaster Assistance Program, was set up in August 2009 to serve approximately 65 Keithsburg, IL, families that were affected by the flood of 2008. The flood assistance program worked diligently to help relocate two families that had been residing in FEMA trailers before of the end of the assistance period on Dec. 24, 2009. Assistance from the Mercer County Flood Assistance Program and numerous volunteers helped the families reach their goal of moving into a new home. Basement repair and mold remediation will be offered to Keithsburg flood residents still in need.

[FACT SHEET]

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Project Sustainability and Capacity Building

The strategies identified in the Mercer County Climate Change Adaptation Plan will continue to be addressed through the emergency preparedness section of MCHD. Many CCAC members also serve on the Mercer County Community Preparedness Committee and have committed to maintaining focus on the effects of extreme weather and what can be done to lessen the impact and better respond to extreme weather events as they occur.

MCHD plans to keep climate change an active part of its emergency preparedness program with a focus on extreme weather events. This will allow MCHD to continue to look at the health impacts of climate change on a more permanent basis.

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Lessons Learned

- Identify community partners who have a shared interest in the project to generate a strong action committee. The local emergency management agency is a good place to start. Then identify partners from all the agencies with similar interests to help give expert input and include state partners.
- Using the term “extreme weather” instead of “climate change” or “global warming” gives the public and community partners a better understanding of the project.
- Rural communities are strapped for funding and personnel, so many partners represent a number of agencies/sectors.
- Posters provide an effective and cost-efficient approach to educating the public.

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