

## Climate Change Demonstration Site: Thurston County (WA) Public Health & Social Services



### NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE:

Thurston County (WA) Public Health & Social Services

### NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE PROJECT:

Building Capacity for Integrating Climate Change and Public Health Programs: Thurston County, Washington

### Project Summary

The Thurston County Public Health and Social Services (TCPHSS) project “Building Capacity for Integrating Climate Change and Public Health Programs” had three main goals:

- Build TCPHSS understanding of, and capacity to plan for, the public health consequences of climate change;
- Increase the capacity of TCPHSS to ameliorate the public health impact of climate change in Thurston County; and
- Disseminate information about the public health impacts of climate change locally, regionally, and nationally.

In order to build local health department (LHD) understanding, TCPHSS formed a core cross-division workgroup to implement project activities, established an internal advisory group of content experts, and conducted a literature review of the effects of climate change on public health. The result was a white paper on the local public health impacts of climate change that was shared with TCPHSS leadership and staff (available in NACCHO’s Climate Change Toolkit at <http://bit.ly/LbvG0j>). Project staff conducted three briefings with the TCPHSS senior management team, briefed the TCPHSS governing body (i.e., the Thurston County Board of Health, which is composed of three county commissioners), and developed, delivered, and evaluated training for all TCPHSS staff (including leadership), which reached 79 percent of employees. TCPHSS also identified project-related priorities moving forward: maintain a cross-division workgroup focused on climate change and public health; conduct additional TCPHSS staff training; and assign a staff member to participate in 2010–2011 county climate change planning process occurring outside of TCPHSS.

To increase the capacity of TCPHSS to ameliorate the public health impact of climate change in Thurston County, project staff used existing networks of professional partners to share information about the public health impacts of climate change and introduce these health impacts as an emerging area requiring increasing attention from multiple agencies and organizations. This information-sharing introduced the importance of climate change adaptation to many groups that had not considered this part of their scopes of work prior to the project. The importance of climate change adaptation was conveyed by engaging with colleagues working on emergency response and public health preparedness who do not typically view climate change as related to their work. By connecting the issue directly to preparedness work through examples of the impacts that climate change may have on emergency response and the intensity of demands that may be thrust upon emergency response and public health preparedness staff, project staff were able to convey the importance of climate change adaptation. TCPHSS did the following:

- Conferred with Thurston County Long Range Planning, a division within the Thurston County Planning Department, about the findings of a greenhouse gas emissions audit of TCPHSS and the role of TCPHSS staff in an upcoming Thurston County Climate Action Planning process;
- Contributed to the development of “a resolution to strengthen Thurston County’s pathway to zero greenhouse gas emissions by developing and implementing local climate change prevention, adaptation and greenhouse gas reduction plans,” passed by the Thurston County Board of County Commissioners on Aug. 24, 2010; and
- Identified and assigned a TCPHSS staff person to participate on Thurston County’s Climate Change Advisory Committee for the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan.

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In addition, TCPHSS disseminated information about the public health impacts of climate change locally, regionally, and nationally. TCPHSS delivered 10 presentations about the public health impacts of climate change to over 180 policymakers, community leaders, planners, and public health professionals, including the Thurston County Board of Health, the Thurston County Emergency Management Council, the Disaster Assistance Council of Thurston County, Olympia Climate Action, the Lacey City Council, the Region 3 Healthcare Coalition, the Thurston Regional Planning Council, the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) climate change demonstration site meeting/workshop and NACCHO Annual Conference attendees, and the Washington State Department of Health – Environmental Health Group. TCPHSS has also been asked to present to the Olympic Region Clean Air Agency and the Washington State Association of Local Public Health Officials.

TCPHSS prepared generic versions of the presentations (PowerPoint and scripts) to be made available to other counties through NACCHO's Climate Change Toolkit and TCPHSS' webpage. Several public health agencies have directly inquired about use of these materials, and the webpage had over 200 visitors within six months of going live.

## Project Outcomes

The Thurston County Building Capacity for Integrating Climate Change and Public Health Programs met the following objectives:

- Accomplished basic literature review and delineation of the expected health impacts from climate change in Thurston County.
- Maintained a multi-disciplinary, core cross-division workgroup for the duration of the demonstration project that continues to be available to address issues of climate change and public health.
- Developed a community presentation and public health staff training on health impacts of climate change that can be modified to fit within a 10-, 20-, or 30-minute time slot on an agenda.
- Created adaptations of the community presentation to share with other external partner organizations and networks that work primarily on public health preparedness and disaster response.
- Determined that staff from multiple divisions of TCPHSS are interested in learning more about climate change and public health. According to the all-staff training evaluation, 79 percent of TCPHSS employees would like additional training.
- Communicated with the TCPHSS senior management team and obtained a commitment to continue to plan for

and work to address the health impacts of climate change, including both adaptation and mitigation strategies. The TCPHSS director is seeking resources.

## Stories from the Field

- In discussions with the project's internal advisory group of content experts, at least one internal advisory group member said that, while many scientific papers claim to show a link between human activity and climate change, he could find many others that pointed to other causes or that assert that changes were occurring as part of normal climate cycles. While he expressed this concern, he also added that he saw value in understanding changes in health impacts associated with climate.
- During an early core cross-division workgroup meeting, the personal health member used the phrase "potential impact of climate change on health." Noticing the visible cringe by the environmental health member, the personal health member asked, "What did I say?" To which the environmental health member replied, "It is the term 'potential' that I have a hard time with...climate change has happened." The health educator in the group then clarified: "I think she was referring to potential health impact, not that climate change itself is potential."
- During a presentation to the Thurston Regional Planning Council and City of Lacey policymakers, discussion turned to the connection of climate change with other air quality concerns and how to deal with the increased incidence of health impacts such as respiratory illness and vector-borne and zoonotic disease (specifically, what could be done to address new regional sources of air pollution and how to prevent the spread of mosquito-borne illness). The TCPHSS director was valuable to have as a co-presenter in these instances as her breadth of public health experience and knowledge allowed her to answer very concretely about what preventive measures could be taken as policymakers for local jurisdictions and as individuals.
- When core cross-division workgroup members met with staff from the Thurston County Planning Department to hear about the emissions inventory that the planning department had recently completed, the planner indicated a strong interest to include health considerations in the development of a climate action plan for the county. He stated that the only way he could see this being achieved would be to include public health staff as advisors in the upcoming planning process.

## Lessons Learned

- Proceed with a lot of forethought and an intentionally inclusive process. Having multiple disciplines involved (e.g., public health nursing, health education, epidemiology, environmental health monitoring/inspection, public health officer, infectious diseases) helped TCPHSS ensure that it did not overlook potential impacts and roles for the LHD.
- Focus on impacts on human health—for example, by communicating that climate change is an emerging public health issue—rather than on contentious issues like the causes of climate change. Public health impacts are appropriate for LHDs to address and are an extension of work that they already do (e.g., public health preparedness).
- Keep the content of trainings pared down, non-technical, and locally relevant. TCPHSS trainings focused on the major local climate changes, which were already being measured (increased temperature, sea-level rise, changes in precipitation patterns) in the white paper and in presentations. TCPHSS trainings used lay terms and local examples and avoided acronyms and jargon.
- Show LHD staff how health impacts relate to all sectors of the LHD; proactively addressing these issues can ameliorate crises when or if they hit. Illustrate relevance with local case studies (e.g., TCPHSS used stories of its county’s recent flooding and mudslides).
- Develop training for local public health staff through thoughtful examination of consequences resulting from methods used to appeal to the audience. TCPHSS sought to use humor appropriately and tailor it to an audience comprising members with different viewpoints.

## Project Sustainability and Capacity Building

Since the project has ended, demonstration site project staff have discussed how to sustain the work accomplished during the project and how to develop a more comprehensive strategy to respond to the health impacts of climate change. A proposal to the TCPHSS senior management team was developed and presented. As follow-up, project staff further refined the proposal (a more specific work plan and outline of resources needed to implement the plan) and delivered it to the TCPHSS senior management team one month later. The TCPHSS senior management team considered the proposal, decided the approach was sound, and supported proceeding with efforts to address the health impacts of climate change.

The TCPHSS plan to maintain capacity, subject to availability of bridging funds, is the following:

- Conduct immediate follow-up steps (additional training for TCPHSS staff, presentations to external partners);
- Maintain a point of contact and the cross-divisional team for TCPHSS strategy development;
- Participate in countywide planning processes to update Thurston County Comprehensive Plan policies to include health impacts of climate change;
- Ensure health is considered as Thurston County develops a Climate Action Plan that is primarily concerned with mitigation; and
- Pursue other funding opportunities.

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# [FACT SHEET]

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