Local Health Departments are Preparing for the Health Impacts of Climate Change

Boston Public Health Commission

Project Summary

The National Association of County and City Health Officials, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), selected the Boston Public Health Commission as one of 11 local health departments (LHDs) to better understand how city and county health departments are preparing for the health impacts of climate change. The goal of this project was to highlight local efforts to prepare for and build resiliency to the health impacts of climate change and to share these success stories to support new and ongoing initiatives in other LHDs. The project sought to identify best practices and provide real-world case studies. LHDs play an important role in connecting health impacts with the effects of climate change. This project highlights only a few of the many departments actively engaged in climate change efforts.

Background

Boston is the capital city of Massachusetts, is the largest city in New England, and makes up the majority of Suffolk County. It is a relatively dense city (estimated 667,137 residents in a 48-square mile area) comprising 16 culturally diverse neighborhoods containing many sub-populations. As one of America’s gateway cities, Boston has a large population of recent immigrants; 26% of residents are born outside the United States. The Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC) is the city’s health department. BPHC’s mission is to protect, preserve, and promote the health and well-being of all Boston residents, particularly the most vulnerable.

Climate Challenge

As a coastal city, sea level rise and flooding associated with storm surge is a top climate change-related concern for Boston. The city has already experienced localized flooding and major storm events. Emerging climate change concerns also include increasing summer temperatures, an increased number of heat wave days, increased severity of both summer and winter storms, and expanding vector-borne illness.

Goal

Because of the widespread impact of climate change and the diverse nature of the agencies and populations affected by it, BPHC has two broad goals related to climate change. The first is to integrate considerations of public health, environmental justice, and particularly vulnerable populations into all aspects of city policy related to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The second is to develop and maintain a robust infrastructure for public health response to natural disasters. The health department developed several objectives to address this overarching goal and has achieved a number of successes so far.

OBJECTIVES

- Lead by example organizationally both for other city agencies and the public through efforts to mitigate BPHC’s impact on climate change;
- Set a Health in All Policies objective to integrate consideration of public health into the broader scope of all city policies beyond BPHC’s internal processes; and
- Maintain a world-class emergency response and preparedness public health infrastructure that is able to respond to climate-related and other public health emergencies, including the Stephen M. Lawlor Medical Intelligence Center.

Achievements and Successes

- Became the first city agency to purchased hybrid vehicles in 2001, leading the way for Boston’s current vehicle fleet made up almost entirely of hybrid vehicles;
- Led the Clean Air Cabs program, launched in 2006, to replace a significant portion of the city’s licensed taxi cabs with hybrid vehicles;
- Integrated public health into larger city discussions around climate change in pursuit of the Health In All Policies objective;
- Played a significant role in developing the city’s first greenhouse gas emissions inventory and climate action plan;
- Implemented physical activity and injury prevention into citywide policies, including Boston’s Complete Streets program; and
- Participated in the citywide multi-agency climate change adaptation planning efforts in coordination with BPHC’s Office of Public Health Preparedness and Environmental and Occupational Health divisions.

References


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