



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND HUMAN SERVICES
WASHINGTON, D.C.

Environmental Justice:

Priority Areas of Focus

2015–2016

Department of Health and Human Services Environmental Justice Working Group Priority Areas of Focus, 2015-2016

Background

In February 2012, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published its [2012 Environmental Justice Strategy and Implementation Plan](#) (Strategy), as required by Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-income Populations*. The Strategy provides direction for HHS efforts to achieve environmental justice as part of its mission by maintaining the following three guiding principles.

- Create and implement meaningful public partnerships
- Ensure interagency and intra-agency coordination
- Establish and implement accountability measures

Accomplishments to Date

The Strategy promoted heightened coordination within and outside of HHS and the engagement of communities and other stakeholders to facilitate the implementation of much of the Strategy and support the realization of its vision, “a nation that equitably promotes healthy community environments and protects the health of all people.” Many HHS environmental justice accomplishments are described in recent HHS Environmental Justice Implementation Progress Reports, available on the new [Environmental Justice at HHS](#) webpage. To date, 33 of 37 actions are either complete or in progress, and some of these actions are highlighted below.

- Educating communities about the HHS Office for Civil Rights.
- Supporting research on the effects of climate change on the health of vulnerable populations, including those with environmental justice concerns.
- Providing guidance to state and local health departments to help them prepare for the impacts of climate change.
- Supporting efforts to address occupational health disparities.
- Promoting the use of health impact assessments to promote “health in all policies”.
- Supporting research and strengthening the capacity for research on the health effects of disproportionately high and adverse environmental health exposures in minority and low-income populations.
- Providing hazardous material training to approximately 10,000 people in more than 30 communities across 20 states and DC through the Worker Training Program, since its inception in 1995.

A table of actions in the Strategy and their status appears in the 2015 HHS Environmental Justice Progress Report. To the extent possible, HHS will continue to work toward completing the actions in the Strategy. However, the following actions cannot be completed and have been deemed “inactive.”

- Education and Training A.2: Partner with other federal departments to develop and implement integrated educational outreach and intervention programs.¹
- Education and Training B.2: Incorporate environmental justice and environmental and occupational safety and health education in the training curricula.²
- Services C.1: Build community capacity to conduct community health assessments.³
- Services A.3: Improve the quality of behavioral health care received by minority and low-income populations and Indian Tribes with disproportionately high and adverse environmental exposures.⁴

Identifying Priorities

Based on progress made among the actions described in the Strategy and on emerging opportunities to advance environmental justice, the HHS Environmental Justice Working Group (HHS EJ Working Group) recently identified priority areas of focus for the next two years, 2015 through 2016.

HHS EJ Working Group members determined the priority areas of focus through an iterative feedback process, based on the Delphi technique.⁵ Members were asked to prioritize focus areas from the Strategy and to suggest additional focus areas for consideration. Based on the responses, members next identified achievable actions—with consideration to the potential output/outcome, feasibility, timeliness, and resource commitments.

Priority Areas of Focus

The 2015-2016 priority areas of focus reflect new and ongoing actions around climate change, community involvement, data and tools, and funding opportunities. These priority areas are consistent with the Strategy's four strategic elements: 1) policy development and dissemination, 2) education and training, 3) research and data collection, analysis, and utilization, and 4) services. As described below, they also support HHS efforts to 1) identify and address disproportionately high and adverse human health and environmental effects on low-income populations and Indian tribes, and 2) encourage the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of affected parties with the goal of building healthy, resilient communities and reducing disparities in health and well-being associated with environmental factors.

¹ Staff resources are unavailable to carry out action.

² Staff resources are unavailable to carry out action.

³ An organizational realignment within the cognizant agency has made this action unachievable.

⁴ Unable to make the direct association between improved quality of behavioral health care and adverse environmental risk exposures.

⁵ Hsu, Chia-Chien & Sandford, Brian A. (2007). The Delphi Technique: Making Sense of Consensus. Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation, 12(10). Available online: <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=12&n=10>.

Climate Change

Related EJ Strategy Elements: Policy Development and Dissemination; Education and Training

HHS considers climate change to be one of the top public health challenges of our time. Because it is important to consider how climate change affects vulnerable populations, the HHS EJ Working Group plans to leverage existing resources to address the disproportionate impact of climate change on environmental justice communities. The HHS EJ Working Group will focus on the following efforts:

- Building community resilience and sustainable, stronger health and emergency response systems for climate change, to prevent or reduce emerging health threats and chronic health problems.
- Strengthening community partnerships to organize adaptation measures to lessen the effects of climate change on health at the local level.
- Expanding and promoting educational outreach on health and environmental justice to primary health care and behavioral health care providers, other health professionals, public health professionals and the human services workforce.
- Hosting a climate change and environmental justice workshop with community stakeholders.

Community Capacity

Related EJ Strategy Element: Services

In addition to engaging communities to address public health in the face of climate change, the HHS EJ Working Group also recognizes the continued need to address issues that environmental justice communities have stated are important. The HHS EJ Working Group plans to:

- Encourage community-driven partnerships with academic/research-intensive organizations to address problems important to communities and build capacity among community members to help monitor, identify, mitigate, and respond to environmental emergencies.
- Promote improvements of the quality of behavioral health care at the regional level.
- Collaborate in regional activities developed by the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice.

Data and Tools

Related EJ Strategy Element: Research and Data Collection, Analysis, and Utilization

Across the federal government, a variety of tools and databases are available to assess the health status of populations and to assess the environmental factors in which populations reside and work. While there has been some progress, there remains a need to continue linking data and tools to enable decision-makers to better examine how environmental factors affect health. The HHS EJ Working Group will aim to partner with other federal departments to review and update community mapping tools and other databases, to identify populations with disproportionately high and adverse environmental exposures and health effects.

Funding Opportunities

Related EJ Strategy Element: Policy Development and Dissemination

The HHS EJ Working Group also noted the need for funding opportunities aimed at improving health outcomes among environmental justice communities, as well as helping them to access federal resources. To address this need, the HHS EJ Working Group will continue to promote the inclusion of environmental justice in funding opportunities, where feasible and appropriate.

Next Steps

Building on the momentum generated by identifying the priority areas of focus, the HHS EJ Working Group is already implementing actions. For example, a workshop focused on climate change and human health is being planned with community stakeholders and other federal departments. The workshop will provide an opportunity to disseminate new guidance to help develop climate change resilient healthcare facilities. Regional HHS staff are leveraging a new community engagement program to identify what public health issues are important to communities and then partnering with local organizations that can provide technical assistance to address the health issues. And, HHS will continue to collaborate with the Federal Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice not only to promote interagency goals, but also to use the interagency working group as a platform to promote HHS priority areas of focus, as opportunities arise. Consistent with Executive Order 12898, *Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-income Populations*, the HHS EJ Working Group will report on its progress in implementing the priority areas of focus in its annual environmental justice implementation progress report, as well as other reports and venues, as appropriate.