99-13

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STATEMENT OF POLICY

Environmental Health and Public Health Practice

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Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) considers environmental public health to be an essential discipline of public health practice as it fulfills "society's interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy."[1]

With respect to environmental public health, NACCHO does the following:

- Considers the term "environmental public health" to be the most appropriate term in describing this area of public health practice.
- Advocates for resources, programs, policies, and legislation that promote the value of the environmental public health practitioner and the integration of environmental public health into all of public health practice.
- Endorses the use of the core functions of public health and the 10 Essential Public Health Services for environmental public health practice.[2]
- Endorses the development and enhancement of coordinated training for the environmental public health workforce in public health sciences and practices including epidemiology, toxicology, land use and community planning, the social and behavioral sciences, and emergency management and public health preparedness.
- Endorses training for other public health workers in environmental sciences and practices, such as life cycle analysis of contaminants in the environment, food and water protection and safety, the 10 Essential Environmental Public Health Services, and Environmental Public Health Performance Standards (EnvPHPS).[2,3]
- Advocates that environmental public health practitioners collaborate across sectors to prevent disease and injury and promote health, recognizing that determinants of health are largely influenced by policies managed by non-health sectors.[4,5]
- Supports connecting environmental public health practice with communities through practices and tools, including community engagement, EnvPHPS, and the Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE EH).
- Advocates for the evolution of academic curricula that adapts to current and evolving environmental public health practices that better prepare the future environmental public health workforce.
- Advocates for the inclusion of local environmental public health practice in the prevention provisions of the Affordable Care Act that assist other public health disciplines and healthcare organizations in reducing chronic diseases through community interventions and environmental assessments.
- Advocates for the inclusion of environmental public health practice with other public health practices, physically, programmatically, and/or by leadership.

Justification

The Institute of Medicine's report *The Future of Public Health* states that "The removal of environmental health authority from public health has led to fragmented responsibility, lack of coordination, and inadequate attention to the public health dimensions of environmental health issues."[2] The World Health Organization's (WHO) report *Preventing Disease through Healthy Environments* recognizes that "public and preventive health strategies that consider environmental health interventions…are cost-effective and yield benefits that also contribute to the overall well-being of communities."[6]

The integration of environmental public health and public health practice is essential to preventing disease and protecting the health of communities. Environmental public health has historically been a public health activity. Recently, at some federal, state, and local levels, the two practices have been separated. Environmental public health promotes preventive public health solutions across multiple domains including planning, development, and transportation by building databases (e.g., Environmental Public Health Tracking (EPHT))[7,8] and tools (e.g., health impact assessments (HIAs)). [9]

EPHT is a federally funded surveillance system designed to identify various diseases and illness resulting from exposure to environmental stressors and indicators. EPHT provides data that is used to identify harmful illness and disease trends that are useful when developing interventions and prevention strategies. (See NACCHO policy statement [Environmental Public Health Tracking](.).)

The goal of conducting an HIA on projects, policies, programs, or plans related to the built environment is to influence community member's likelihood of making healthy behavioral choices. The built environment encompasses land use; transportation planning; the physical design of communities; environmental amenities such as bike and walking paths and parks; physical access to services; and the locations of manufacturing, energy production, and agriculture. All of this is relevant because the job of environmental public health is to "assure conditions in which people can be healthy."[9]

Communities need to proactively consider the impact of what they build on human health. Leading causes of death such as chronic disease, injury, asthma, and mental health are becoming linked to environmental factors. Diet and physical activity have been found to be significantly affected by physical access to stores with healthy foods, bike walking paths, and parks; bicyclist and pedestrian deaths associated with motor vehicle crashes have all been linked to transportation planning.[9, 10,11]

Decision-makers should consider health impacts before changing public policy or regulation, building or altering environments or systems to better prevent harm and maximize positive impacts for people who will live in those environments. Decision-makers also need to better understand how different communities can be impacted inequitably by the same policy in order to promote environmental justice.[11] This realization has led to an even broader initiative called Health in All Policies (HiAP), in which the human health effects of any policy should be considered before that policy is adopted. There is an important role for environmental public health in HIA and in HiAP.[12]

The future of environmental public health should be expanded while maintaining the core traditional environmental public health practices. Built environmental settings designed, created, modified, and maintained by human efforts should be one of the main future focuses of environmental public health practice.[13] This includes access to healthy foods and food security, and reducing toxic exposures from contaminated air and water due to agriculture, manufacturing, and energy production. Similarly, heart disease, a major cause of early death and disability, can be also ameliorated by physical activity and environments that make it easier for people to be active. Additionally, climate change is modifying built and natural environments making it important now more than ever to promote environmental public health practices and policy so that communities do not suffer worse health outcomes as a result.[14]

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Record of Action

Proposed by NACCHO Environmental Health Committee
Adopted by NACCHO Board of Directors November 7, 1999
Updated September 2003
Updated July 2009
Updated November 2014
Updated October 2018