

## Climate Change Demonstration Site: Austin/Travis County (TX) Health and Human Services Department



### NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE:

Austin/Travis County (TX) Health and Human Services Department

### NAME OF DEMONSTRATION SITE PROJECT:

Increasing Climate Change Coordination and Building Capacity through Community Engagement to Enhance Environmental Public Health in Austin, Texas

### Project Summary

The Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department (A/TCHHSD) planned its climate change demonstration site project to be implemented in four steps:

- Gap analysis/needs assessment;
- Climate change training;
- Stakeholder committee; and
- Implementation.

Planning and implementation of this project were organized around deliverables set for each category. These deliverables were intended to provide a lasting resource for A/TCHHSD as it builds from the results of the demonstration site project grant towards establishing a permanent climate change and health program within itself.

Evaluation of this project was concentrated on a gap analysis and stakeholder prioritization report. The report provides results from the gap analysis and stakeholder prioritization exercises that were conducted during the project and recommendations for future work. Recommendations in the report included that all regional policies and programs related to climate change and health should prioritize building awareness about the science behind climate change and associated health impacts, gathering data to provide an evidence base for policy recommendations and public health surveillance activities, and expanding public health's role in local and regional land use planning processes. The gap analysis and needs assessment report is available in NACCHO's Climate Change Toolkit at <http://bit.ly/LbvGOj>.



### Project Outcomes

A gap analysis/needs assessment was administered to A/TCHHSD staff and its core project partners (Austin Climate Protection Program, City of Austin Office of Homeland Security & Emergency Management, Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services, and Texas Department of State Health Services Region 7) to identify areas of existing capacity, areas of overlapping responsibility, areas of existing collaboration, and opportunities to target capacity-building activities related to the links between climate change and health. The large number of A/TCHHSD

survey participants answering “Don’t Know” to questions assessing the level of current activity in their departments related to climate change supports the need for additional training and a standing cross-departmental committee to streamline data sharing and cooperation on climate change projects. For example, many A/TCHHSD staff were not aware that the department has already assessed its carbon footprint and developed a strategy for reducing its environmental impact. The goal of current trainings is to lower the number of “Don’t Know” responses with any future administrations of the survey.

The gap analysis uncovered perceived data gaps that may be able to be reconciled through increased communication both within the City of Austin and with outside agencies such as the Lower Colorado River Authority and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. Finally, the survey found that A/TCHHSD and its partners are already engaged in preparedness, emergency response, and community outreach programs that could be expanded to include climate change awareness and response. Additional staff trainings and data collection/sharing will be targeted to address the gaps identified by the gap analysis.

The Austin Climate Protection Program (part of the City of Austin Office of Sustainability, which works to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions of the city government and the community at large) has incorporated a short public health training module produced by A/TCHHSD into the citywide climate change education program. The incorporation of this module into the citywide educational program will provide training on public health’s role in local climate change initiatives for A/TCHHSD staff and external healthcare providers such as other members of the Integrated Care Collaborative, a nonprofit alliance of healthcare providers in central Texas. Four iterations of an additional module focusing specifically on public health were delivered to A/TCHHSD staff in May 2011. The public health module will also be made available to other relevant City of Austin departments to increase their level of knowledge about the links between health and climate change.

As a result of this project, A/TCHHSD staff are more knowledgeable about the science behind climate change, the links between climate change and health, and the links between climate change and programmatic activities within their

department than they were before the demonstration site grant from the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO).

This project aimed to build capacity among regional healthcare providers and other stakeholders around the relationship between public health and climate change through the creation of a stakeholder committee. The stakeholder group included representation from the following organizations:

- Austin Climate Protection Program/Austin Energy
- Austin/Travis County Emergency Medical Services
- Austin/Travis County Health and Human Services Department
- Capital Area Council of Governments (CAPCOG)
- City of Austin Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management
- City of Austin Watershed Protection Department
- International Flash Flood Laboratory, Texas State University
- Texas Department of State Health Services Region 7
- Williamson County & Cities Health District

Despite varying political views in central Texas about the cause of climate change, the stakeholder committee agreed that the health effects of climate change must be addressed at the regional level by a multi-disciplinary coalition. A regional approach to building climate change into emergency preparedness activities will likely be the first step in developing a coordinated regional approach to building community resilience to its effects.

The single largest barrier to implementation of policies prioritizing interventions that provide co-benefits to public health and greenhouse gas emissions reduction is the absence of data—particularly health outcome data. The project team has discussed with A/TCHHSD Epidemiology and Health Statistics Unit the possibility of conducting a research study with geospatial hospital discharge data relevant to local climate change-related events. The project team hopes that the conversations started during the NACCHO demonstration site grant mark progress toward the continued development of standards for the City of Austin geospatial data.

## Lessons Learned

- A/TCHHSD places a high value on the working relationship established between A/TCHHSD and its partners on the stakeholder committee (particularly the Austin Climate Protection Program).
- LHDs should identify the key environmental issues in their region, the LHD's scope of influence, what activities are already ongoing in the LHD's region, and who are the LHD's most likely partners and allies.
- LHDs should try to link the project to the priorities of the LHD or regional jurisdictions.
- LHDs should try to embed climate change work into their existing programs.
- LHDs should start small.
- LHDs should encourage inter-departmental and inter-organizational partnerships. In many cases, the LHD will not be able to effectively launch a climate change program without partnering with other groups.

## Stories from the Field

- The activities supported by the NACCHO grant have resulted in mapping key populations vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change in Travis County, establishing ongoing collaboration and data sharing across a wide array of City of Austin departments, and identifying the strength of existing programs that provide both health co-benefits and climate change mitigation or adaptation services.
- A vulnerability mapping exercise conducted, in part, through the NACCHO demonstration site funding, identified several neighborhoods in the City of Austin that were particularly vulnerable to extreme heat or flooding events. A/TCHHSD invited representatives from these neighborhoods to participate in the stakeholder committee process. While they did not provide an active committee participant, the invitation opened dialogue about climate change vulnerability that could be expanded through future community outreach efforts.
- The results of the baseline gap analysis have already been used in several ways. They filled perceived data gaps by locating relevant data sources that are collected outside of the LHD. The search for data that are relevant to the health impacts of climate change has also opened a citywide conversation about the best way to standardize spatial data collection and sharing. The gap analysis has also pinpointed areas where existing programmatic activity could inform or integrate climate change policies and programs. Finally, gap analysis acted as a first round of training about the science behind climate change and its relevance to core public health activities.

## Project Sustainability and Capacity Building

A/TCHHSD's internal conversations to identify the timeframe and opportunity for building a climate change and health program within A/TCHHSD are ongoing.

The project has provided the opportunity for the Austin Climate Protection Program to incorporate the health impacts of climate change into its staff training and into the citizen climate action plan process, which launched during the grant period. A/TCHHSD is using the grant project to enhance coordination between the LHD and the Austin Climate Protection Program so that joint initiatives continue after the grant period.

The project team also applied for several grant opportunities, which would allow the project to continue until a permanent place for it can be identified in the general fund.

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# [FACT SHEET]

July 2012



## Acknowledgments

This document was made possible through support from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Cooperative Agreement #5U38HM000449-04. NACCHO is grateful for this support. The views expressed within do not necessarily represent those of the sponsor.

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