



# Community-Based Environmental Health Assessments in the States August 2005

Community environmental health assessments have traditionally helped to identify and prioritize environmental health needs at the local level. ASTHO was interested in learning how such processes have been, and could be, used by the states. To accomplish this, ASTHO spoke with health agency staff from Florida and New Mexico, two states which have conducted community-based environmental health assessments. Additionally, ASTHO consulted with the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and received training on their “Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health” (*PACE EH*). *PACE EH* is a community environmental health assessment process consisting of 13 “tasks” designed to engage the public, create a profile of a community’s environmental health status, and generate an action plan. This document is a summary of the two state programs and contains ideas for other states that may be considering a similar process.

- PACE EH* addresses the following challenges:
- Accurately identify environmental health issues in communities;
  - Identify populations at disproportionate risk of environmental exposure and adverse health outcomes;
  - Discover, collect, and analyze meaningful environmental health data; and
  - Strategically allocate resources to address pressing concerns.

### Florida

The Florida Department of Health (FL DOH) is using the *PACE EH* with the goal of involving

the community in environmental health, especially at hazardous waste sites and in respect to sanitation issues. The hope is that the program will directly address some of the negative perceptions about governmental agencies that are present in both the community and the media. Ultimately, the FL DOH plans to summarize the results and use them as guidance for prioritizing issues, ensuring follow-up on these issues, and building a self-sustaining program.

Initially, the FL DOH tried to get counties to conduct community environmental assessments on their own; but the process was too time-intensive and the counties had no resources. In 2003, the department issued a request for applications to which 24 local health departments responded. The department initially provided funding to 13 of these applicants in the form of one-year, \$30,000 grants. Most of the local health departments are using the money to help fund an Environmental Health Coordinator position—typically a part-time employee. Approximately ten of the 13 funded departments were using the *PACE EH* methodology. In March 2004, the FL DOH made more money available, this time requiring the use of the *PACE EH* methodology. To date, 21 counties have begun pilot projects with state funding, and an additional county project will start soon.

The money for these projects comes from inspection-service fees throughout the state. The counties have a long-standing interest in doing community environmental health assessments and FL DOH hopes that this seed money will help to launch the programs. A long-term goal is to have a program in every county, as well as a system where counties can help each other with the process. The success of the program demonstrates the ability of the state to send money to locals and allow the locals to work

without oversight. The state is a crucial link, connecting the counties with each other and coordinating the overall process.

Tasks involved in the *PACE EH* process:

1. Determine community capacity
2. Define and characterize the community
3. Assemble a community-based environmental health assessment team
4. Define the goals, objectives, and scope of the assessment
5. Generate a list of community-specific environmental health issues
6. Analyze the issues with a systems framework
7. Develop locally appropriate indicators
8. Select standards against which local status can be compared
9. Create issue profiles
10. Rank the issues
11. Set priorities for action
12. Develop an action plan
13. Evaluate progress and plan for future

Daniel Parker, the Florida Assistant Director of the Division of Environmental Health, feels that the process has helped build relationships between the state and local departments of health. Mr. Parker receives bimonthly updates from grantees and regularly sends them information. The state health agency also ensures that the county projects conform to the scope of the original agreement.

Partially as a result of this program, the Division of Environmental Health has been recognized as an innovative and progressive division within the FL DOH. External recognition recently came at the NACCHO-ASTHO 2005 Annual Meeting, where the FL *PACE EH* program received a second place ASTHO Vision Award and the Indian River County Health Department

received the ASTHO-NACCHO 2005 Jim Parker Award for their co-ordination with the state health department on the *PACE EH* project.

Mr. Parker notes that, for a successful program, the department needs to be flexible. Results from ongoing pilot projects have not only helped reexamine the way FL DOH provides services to communities, but also supplemented these services with community assessment activities. Many of the community concerns identified through the pilot projects dealt with non-traditional environmental health issues such as neighborhood safety, abandoned lots, and trust in local and state government officials. In order to maintain and further the relationship with the community, these concerns were included as priorities, despite the fact that they are not traditional environmental health issues. Successful outcomes from the community assessments include installation of streetlights; procurement of easements for a potable water project; development of projects to create sidewalks, build park pavilions, and refurbish homes; and recovery of community trust.

Many of the issues center on land use planning decisions, highlighting the importance of involving environmental and public health departments in the planning process. As a result of the *PACE EH* activities, FL DOH has drafted a memorandum of agreement with other Florida state agencies to work together on growth management planning. Mr. Parker notes that *PACE EH* provides a good model for viewing environmental health holistically and linking the built environment with environmental health.

Mr. Parker recommends that other health departments allow communities to define their own concerns, and to work across program boundaries to find successful solutions. He also invokes the commonly heard refrain, “no more unfunded mandates,” pointing out how important it is to provide at least some seed money for these programs. Finally, he stresses the need to follow-up. Not only should the state follow-up with the local health department grantees, but the grantees should in turn follow-up with the communities.

## **New Mexico**

The Environmental Public Health Tracking project at the New Mexico Department of Health (NM DOH) developed an agreement with the agency's Improving Health Initiative. The initiative provides staff support and training in health assessment and action planning to county and tribal health councils. The purpose of the agreement was to provide mini-grants to county and tribal health councils to support the addition of an environmental health assessment to their on-going community health assessments.

The mini-grants, offered to the councils through the Improving Health Initiative, required the councils to:

- Participate in an all-day training on community environmental health assessment (CEHA).
- Conduct well-publicized community meetings to gather information about citizen environmental health concerns.
- Prioritize the concerns according to criteria presented at the training.
- Provide indicators for the priorities where possible.
- Develop a report to the Environmental Public Health Tracking project.
- Add the priorities to their community health profiles.

The CEHA training used principles from the *PACE EH* process that were specifically adapted for New Mexico. The assessments conducted by the councils are equivalent to the initial steps in the *PACE EH* process.

Barbara Malczewska-Toth, an environmental health epidemiologist, and David Coffey, a health educator with the NM DOH, felt that one of the early successes of the program was the training, which brought the department together with the U.S. Indian Health Service, the New Mexico Environment Department, and the local councils. Over 120 people participated in the training. This response helped not only to raise the profile of the NM DOH, but also helped to build relationships among the participants. the NMED.

Since then the NM DOH has not only formed a work group with the Indian Health Service, but also has an environmental health "Service Partnership" with them to promote the exchange of technological expertise. The NM DOH hopes that the program will help guide the development of New Mexico's Environmental Public Health Tracking project by assisting in the development of health indicators.

As of June 2005, nearly all of the 33 county councils and four tribal health councils have participated in the mini-grant process. The first group of 22 council assessments summarized their results in June 2004. Some of the councils are ready to develop action plans and small grants are being provided to assist this effort. The New Mexico Environmental Public Health Tracking project will focus on measures to track priority environmental health issues and indicators over time.

## **Conclusion**

Community environmental health assessments are an excellent way not only to address the environmental health needs of individual communities but also to increase their level of understanding of environmental health issues. Many health agencies have considered community environmental health assessment to be a local function, but Florida and New Mexico have shown that, given support and guidance from the state level, these programs can be even more effective. State programs help to coordinate the efforts of all of the communities involved, increase the ease with which resources and information are shared among the communities and other stakeholders, and provide more stability to ensure the sustainability of these programs.

## **Useful Links**

The NACCHO Community Based Environmental Health Assessment (*PACE EH*) Program ([www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/CEHA.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/CEHA.cfm))

Florida Department of Health *PACE EH* Program ([www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/programs/pace%20Deh/PACE\\_EH.htm](http://www.doh.state.fl.us/environment/programs/pace%20Deh/PACE_EH.htm))

New Mexico's Community Environmental Health Assessment Program ([www.border-health-education-training-center.org/html/environmental\\_health.html](http://www.border-health-education-training-center.org/html/environmental_health.html))

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*This work was supported in part by a Cooperative Agreement with the National Center for Environmental Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Department of Health and Human Services. ASTHO is grateful for their support.*

*The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) is the national nonprofit organization representing the state and territorial public health agencies of the United States, the U.S. Territories, and the District of Columbia. ASTHO's members, the chief health officials of these jurisdictions are dedicated to formulating and influencing sound public health policy, and to assuring excellence in state-based public health practice.*

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ASSOCIATION OF STATE AND  
TERRITORIAL HEALTH OFFICIALS

1275 K Street, NW, Suite 800  
Washington, DC 20005  
Phone: (202) 371-9090  
Fax: (202) 371-9797  
[www.ASTHO.org](http://www.ASTHO.org)  
[www.StatePublicHealth.org](http://www.StatePublicHealth.org)