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Health Agency Staff Collaborate Across Sectors to Address Climate Risks

Background

In July 2024, ASTHO held a listening session with state environmental health directors (SEHD) and directors of public health preparedness (DPHP) to learn more about how they coordinate internally and across sectors to address climate risks. Both peer groups include members from state or territorial health agencies (S/THAs) who work on topics such as environmental health, extreme weather response, and general emergency preparedness. Over 70 staff from 25 jurisdictions participated in the call.

The goals of this meeting were to:

- Facilitate closer connections between SEHDs and DPHPs.
- Better understand these state partners' roles in addressing climate concerns such as extreme heat, wildfire smoke, flooding, and drought.
- Understand which other partners SEHDs and DPHPs engage with on these efforts.
- Understand how SEHDs and DPHPs address equity concerns in these roles (e.g., revising flood maps, food safety plan updates).
- Lay out current mechanisms for data sharing and future opportunities for collaboration between agencies.
- Understand ways that S/THAs support healthcare facilities with their climate risks; and discuss how SEHDs and DPHPs can get their expertise at the table with other partners.

Health in All Policies (HiAP) is a helpful approach that can be integrated into these climate efforts to add long-term value, increase their impact, and better achieve health equity and optimal health for all. Below are seven strategies for implementing HiAP. This report summarizes key themes for each strategy that emerged during the listening session with state and territorial health agencies.

Discussion Themes by HiAP Strategy

HiAP Strategy 1: Develop and Structure Cross-Sector Relationships

SEHDs and DPHPs play crucial roles in addressing climate-related concerns. While SEHDs focus on environmental health aspects such as heat, wildfires, and flooding, DPHPs often develop response plans for these events. In most jurisdictions who participated in the listening session, these program areas collaborate to create a comprehensive approach to addressing climate-related health concerns.

SEHDs and DPHPs often collaborate on planning initiatives around extreme heat that incorporate environmental justice considerations to protect vulnerable individuals and communities.

A key aspect of this collaboration involves working closely with community partners to identify priorities for local communities. DPHPs also work alongside emergency management officials, particularly in planning for flooding events, and have recognized the need to enhance coordination with SEHDs. Emergency preparedness response plans are developed with the Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) program.

Arizona has taken a proactive approach by holding a statewide heat planning summit with PHEP that focuses on community priorities.

S/THAs also engage federal partners at FEMA, the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, CDC, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Department of Agriculture, and EPA specifically on climate, including their region-specific representatives. S/THAs also work with the National Weather Service on extreme heat and sheltering their homeless populations during winter cold snaps. A few states have cabinet-level climate offices that report to their governors. Other strategic partners engaged on climate include hospital coalitions and developmental disability groups (especially during wildfires). S/THAs also engage public utilities to aid with emergency response efforts.

Maryland Department of Health has a robust Extreme Heat Emergency Plan which includes surveillance, communications, local health department activities, and triggers for the pre-heat season, the heat season, complex heat emergencies, and the post-heat season.

In **Hawaii**, the department of health plans to host a climate change conference to incorporate public health considerations into emergency planning and response efforts.

HiAP Strategy 2: Enhance Workforce Capacity

Enhancing workforce capacity is one strategy used by S/THAs to help boost their efforts and leverage additional resources. This involves joining or forming coalitions and engaging other federal, state, local, and NGO partners during climate-related events, such as hurricanes, drought, and extreme heat and cold to enhance their workforce capacity. Internally, environmental health and preparedness programs work together to address climate risk and natural disasters, including leveraging each other's communications platforms and distribution lists for climate messaging and education. One state noted that they formed an epidemiology research group focused on heat and heat surveillance.

Massachusetts' governor created the cabinet-level Office of Climate Innovation and Resilience, which seeks to promote active collaboration across all secretariats within the administration. Each state agency under the purview of this office is required to demonstrate a clear and consistent commitment to addressing climate change.

Utah Department of Health and Human Services collaborates with the state's Office of Homeless Services to coordinate shelter surge during cold weather events. Utah is also in the process of developing similar policies for extreme heat events.

Hawaii worked closely with their developmental disabilities group during the Maui wildfires to transition people from congregate to non-congregate shelters and placing people in long-term rentals due to the fires.

HiAP Strategy 3: Incorporate Health into Decision-Making

Health agency staff use multiple tools and strategies to incorporate health considerations into state governmental decision-making processes. These include cross-sector needs assessments, strategic planning, and utilizing guides and best practices.

One specific area that the listening session touched on was how health agencies support healthcare facilities in their climate risks, such as during and after floods and power outages in hospitals. In these instances, S/THAs coordinate with local health departments and regional offices on supporting the impacted facilities. They also work to integrate public health into emergency planning and response plans and partner with other offices, such as the Office of Health Care Quality, to ensure licensed facilities have power outage plans in place prior to an event. Some jurisdictions embed environmental staff members in their emergency preparedness office to aid with water quality, mold and moisture, and other environmental health specific hazards and provide feedback from an environmental health lens. S/THAs also provide feedback on hospital evacuation plans and help brainstorm solutions that arise from challenges with small healthcare facilities that may need to be evacuated.

One state noted that they have a healthcare preparedness coalition that is run out of their emergency preparedness program that facilitates ongoing interactions with hospitals. Members of this coalition can utilize a computer software program to communicate with the health agency very quickly during emergencies.

Outside of emergencies, S/THAs work with the healthcare licensing division for communication plans with hospitals and healthcare facilities, administer healthcare preparedness grants, engage with Medicare and Medicaid, and work to identify the gaps in communication between S/THAs and healthcare providers. In addition, some states host climate change conferences where they invite healthcare providers and hospital administrators to engage with a larger group on planning for natural disasters and other climate risks.

Massachusetts Department of Public Health introduced "climate" into the name of the Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health to integrate and amplify the importance of climate work in environmental health. The agency also incorporated environmental justice and vulnerable health criteria into statewide climate initiatives (including preparedness for extreme weather) and introduced extreme heat factsheets.

Hawaii received support from their representative from the Administration for Strategic Preparedness and Response, who connected them with the Northern California hospital coalition to talk about power shutdowns.

HiAP Strategy 4: Coordinate Funding and Investments

Climate response activities can be supported by funding streams that allow for integration of climate considerations into broader public health initiatives, such as incorporating climate response activities into PHEP grant activities. This approach allows health agencies to leverage funding dedicated to enhancing preparedness and response capabilities in the context of climate-related events such as extreme heat, wildfires, and flooding.

Funding for healthy homes is another significant resource that can support climate-related work. By focusing on the intersection of climate change and housing conditions, health agencies can address both environmental health and preparedness risks, particularly for vulnerable populations. Leveraging these resources helps jurisdictions promote safer living environments and resiliency to climate hazards.

Ohio established a public health and extreme weather workgroup. This workgroup is dedicated to responding to extreme weather events and developing resources that can be deployed statewide. This initiative exemplifies how state programs can promote coordination and alignment between different partners involved in climate response efforts.

HiAP Strategy 5: Integrate Research, Evaluation, and Data Systems

Health agencies can leverage research and evaluation data to assess how policies impact public health and identify opportunities to support positive health outcomes. This could involve integrating data related to social determinants of health with public health datasets, as well as incorporating health metrics into program evaluations. During the listening sessions, S/THAs shared some of the mechanisms they use for data sharing between programs and agencies.

One example is the development of a task force on climate change. This multi-sector group is used to brainstorm which polices to target for future efforts, as well as additional opportunities to better support their communities in addressing the public health impact of climate change, including those related to extreme weather events.

Arizona works with the National Weather Service on extreme heat and winter cold snaps.

States also utilize data sharing agreements between programs and agencies that help to not only create more efficient communication, but also expand the data being utilized for decision making. The types of data that could be most helpful for this data sharing are historical weather data and community assessment data.

New York City epidemiologists conduct syndromic surveillance for heat-related illness, providing near-real-time situational awareness to inform the City's emergency response. A local hospital system organized a workshop for birthing hospitals around climate and emergency preparedness to bring everyone together.

HiAP Strategy 6: Implement Accountability Structures

Accountability structures like budget oversight, public reporting, performance measures with health considerations, and enforcement of relevant laws promote responsibility and transparency for health agencies and their partners. They also uphold health-related objectives and legal standards that impact public health. Accountability structures are also one of the strategies used to promote HiAP. During the listening session, SEHDs and DPHPs discussed how the programs they administer are held accountable for their climate resiliency efforts, as well as how they address equity in their response efforts. This most outwardly happens in states who have climate task forces or coalitions. In these cases, the task force meetings are open to the public to understand the steps the group is taking to address climate risks, as well as associated metrics to help evaluate their efforts. Another way S/THAs are held accountable is through engagement with community activists.

One of the state examples shared for this strategy was from **Illinois**, whose task force hosts open meetings with the public and invites community activists to join the meetings to share their work.

HiAP Strategy 7: Synchronize Communications and Messaging

During climate emergency events such as floods or droughts, jurisdictions usually assign a designated department or team to manage all communication efforts within the health agency and with external partners. This team ensures that a unified message is clearly and consistently disseminated to stakeholders, thereby reducing the risk of confusion or misinformation.

The lead department coordinates with other internal teams—including environmental health and emergency preparedness staff—to gather relevant data, assess the situation, and develop messaging that is both informative and actionable. This communication strategy extends to external partners, including local governments, emergency management agencies, and community organizations to ensure a unified response. By centralizing communication responsibilities, the health agency can maintain consistency in its messaging, streamline decision-making, and respond more effectively to emerging needs.

Maryland Department of Health has a robust Extreme Heat Emergency Plan which includes surveillance, communications, local health department activities, and triggers for the pre-heat season, the heat season, complex heat emergencies, and the post-heat season. The Environmental Health Bureau also looks at surveillance and adaptation in both its Environmental Public Health Tracking and Climate and Health programs.

In another state, the health agency defers to the lead department to manage all communication during response events. This approach allows for a focused and organized communication strategy, ensuring that the right information is disseminated promptly and accurately to both internal and external stakeholders.

Conclusion

Extreme weather events and other climate-related threats have a severe impact on health and well-being. Many S/THAs are engaged in cross-sector partnerships and actively working to ensure that their jurisdictions can best adapt to these changes and prepare for future events. Engaging in HiAP activities specific to climate change can occur at any level to support S/THAs and partners in their goals of reducing the negative health impacts of these threats.

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