

How Pennsylvania Health Department's Cross-Sector Partnerships Are Strengthening Climate and Environmental Justice

[Environmental justice](#) is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, or income, to develop, implement, and enforce environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

For decades, Pennsylvania has worked across state government agencies on environmental justice issues. The Pennsylvania Department of Health (DOH) worked alongside the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to convene a statewide [Environmental Justice Working Group](#) in 1999 and subsequently developed an [Environmental Justice Advisory Board](#) to provide recommendations to advance Environmental Justice in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Pennsylvania has prioritized environmental justice due to the ongoing challenges of pollution and climate change faced in [environmental justice areas](#). The state has the third most Superfund sites on EPA's National Priorities List, and many of these sites are in low-income neighborhoods. DEP's 2022 Integrated Water Quality Report found that [33% of Pennsylvania's rivers and streams do not meet quality standards](#) for water supply, aquatic life, recreation, or fish consumption. [Climate change is likely to exacerbate existing racial disparities](#) across a broad range of health outcomes, including death, respiratory and heart disease, mental health, and heat-related illness, especially among infants and children of color.

In October 2021, former Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf took action to better coordinate environmental justice efforts in the state by signing [Executive Order 2021-07](#), which formally established the [Office of Environmental Justice](#) (OEJ) and the Environmental Justice Interagency Council (EJIC) at DEP. Citing the Pennsylvania Constitution's right to clean air and water in [Article 1, Section 27](#), the order directed the office to develop an Environmental Justice strategic plan every five years and create the EJIC. The EJIC membership is comprised of designated staff of the Secretaries of Pennsylvania's executive agencies, including DOH. The EJIC reviews and provides input into the development and implementation of DEP's Environmental Justice plan and makes recommendations to the Governor's office on environmental health issues and recommends processes to incorporate environmental justice considerations into agencies' decision making, among other activities. DOH has actively participated in the EJIC since it first met in 2022 and prioritized environmental justice in the department.

Pennsylvania DOH's Environmental Justice Strategic Plan

DOH prioritizes environmental justice as crucial to fulfilling its mission and vision, [noting](#) that "it is critical to address the disproportionate burden of adverse health effects impacting those living in Environmental Justice Communities to achieve health equity." The Division of Environmental Health Epidemiology at DOH, in collaboration with the Policy Office, Office of Health Equity, and the Bureau of Emergency Response and Preparedness, developed the Environmental Justice Strategic Plan for DOH.

As the first EJIC member to develop an [Environmental Justice Strategic Plan, which was adopted in December 2022](#), other EJIC members are now using DOH's plan as a blueprint to develop their own. The plan provides a framework for continuing and building on DOH's efforts to address health disparities associated with environmental health hazards in vulnerable communities. The strategic plan integrates environmental justice into the DOH's internal and external processes to prioritize the needs of residents living in Environmental Justice communities. Activities in the strategic plan include:

- Increasing awareness among DOH staff of environmental justice and its connection to health equity.
- Strengthening programmatic oversight of environmental justice, health equity, and climate change in the department.
- Integrating environmental justice and health equity principles into grant and contract processes.
- Collaborating with other state agencies to promote environmental justice and health equity.
- Strengthening engagement with environmental justice communities.
- Consulting with the Clean Air Council on climate and land impacts surrounding hazardous sites in the Delaware River Valley.
- Encouraging the development of a pilot program utilizing the [Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program \(LIHEAP\)](#), a federal assistance program to reduce the costs associated with home energy bills, energy crises, weatherization, and minor energy-related home repairs, for air conditioning.
- Developing and showcasing an [Environmental Health Indicators Map](#).

DOH intends to incorporate feedback from Pennsylvania communities into the implementation of the current plan and future iterations of the Strategic Plan.

State Partnerships

[Executive Order 2021-07](#) brought leaders within Pennsylvania DOH and DEP together to begin integrating environmental justice across DOH's work. By leveraging relationships across offices, DOH was able to develop the [Environmental Justice Strategic Plan](#) with existing personnel resources. DOH's Environmental Health Team has also partnered with external organizations through previous or existing grants into which they are building environmental justice initiatives. These partners include the Clean Air Council, the National Weather Service, and Women for a Healthy Environment.

One noted success that Pennsylvania Environmental Health staff shared is that they have not had to "make the case" for integrating environmental health as part of their activities with their partners, as many partners are already aware of environmental justice work and agree that it should be a priority to promote health equity among Pennsylvania residents. This has made partnering with new organizations more streamlined for DOH, as the groundwork has been laid for why this work is important.

One of the Environmental Health Team's main innovations in promoting environmental justice work among new and existing partners has been to utilize grant money in alignment with Strategy 3 in the [Environmental Justice Strategic Plan](#) (i.e., to increase equity of DOH's grant and contracting processes by integrating environmental justice and health equity principles). DOH is in the process of revising the internal grants approvals and contracting processes and working with other state agencies to assess the capacity of environmental justice community-based organizations to apply for and utilize state funds. This new policy will allow them to creatively support their partners' work on the ground.

Incorporating environmental justice and climate work has already resulted in positive outcomes for the long-term actions in DOH. As part of Strategy 2 in the Environmental Justice Strategic Plan (i.e., to

strengthen DOH's environmental justice, health equity, and climate change programmatic oversight), environmental health has been integrated in the most recent [Pennsylvania State Health Assessment](#), and measurable environmental health goals to improve health among those living in Environmental Justice areas were integrated into the [2023-2028 State Health Improvement Plan](#). These goals include reducing the number of heat-related hospitalizations and increasing the number of children between the ages of 0-6 being screened for lead exposure.

Challenges for Incorporating Environmental Justice into Public Health Policy

State executive agency leaders participating in the EJIC support its goals, however each agency establishes its own timeline for implementing the Environmental Justice Strategic Plan. Specific to DOH's Environmental Justice Strategic Plan, DOH leaders note that physicians need training on environmental health, and that environmental health is often not considered a priority until there is a major environmental health crisis (such as the East Palestine, Ohio train derailment in early 2023 that occurred near the Pennsylvania border).

One of DOH's strategies is to prioritize the promotion of environmental justice, along with health equity, in its grants and contracting process. While the agency is working toward this goal, revamping the grants management and accounting processes can be a slow process, especially when there is limited administrative staff capacity. Staff shortages can also contribute to delays in delivering funds to partners, and smaller partner organizations are not always equipped to handle larger levels of funding.

Strategies for Integrating Environmental Justice Across Agencies

Work with Partners when Developing a Strategic Environmental Justice Plan

Working closely with partners (including frequent meetings with leadership teams and across partners) can help departments of health integrate environmental justice work across the agency. Allowing community input during the planning process, including implementation and evaluation, will strengthen the population's buy-in and empower those living in environmentally vulnerable communities.

Integrate Environmental Justice into Grant Proposals and Grant Opportunities

Pennsylvania's proposed grant strategy encourages all programs – regardless of whether they work on environmental health – to consider the impacts of environmental justice, climate change, and health equity into their projects. This strategy includes reaching out to new community-based partners and exploring capacity-building opportunities for organizations that could benefit from additional funding for their work in health equity and environmental justice. This type of grant strategy not only ensures the development and strengthening of partnerships, but also prioritizes environmental justice as a foundational consideration across all state-funded activities.

Test Communicating Environmental Justice Data and its Connections to Health Equity

Pennsylvania's DOH is positioned to provide data indicators for the prevalence of health inequities in environmental justice areas, which can be used to measure the impact of policies being adopted both quantitatively and qualitatively. Pennsylvania's evaluation measurements in its Environmental Justice Strategic Plan can be used to educate partners, policymakers, and the public.