



Los Angeles County Department of Public Health: Climate & Health Initiative

OPR Best Practice Pilot Program

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August 2016

The Governor’s Office of Planning and Research developed the Best Practice Pilot Program (BP3) to formalize the process of providing technical assistance to local and regional partners while capturing the design and implementation of best practices. The BP3 acts as a mechanism to institutionalize the production of case examples of piloted policies or programs recently recommended or required by the State. To learn more about the Best Practice Pilot Program, please visit the [BP3 web page](#). This report is one of a series of case studies supported by CivicSpark, a Governor’s Initiative AmeriCorps Program, administered by the Local Government Commission in partnership with the Governor’s Office of Planning and Research.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Climate and Health Initiative is supported by the Public Health Institute’s Climate Change and Public Health Learning Collaborative for Urban Health Department grant. The Learning Collaborative creates a community of practice by connecting urban health departments that are implementing climate initiatives.



Executive Summary

The Climate and Health Initiative is an internal effort to create a self-sustaining work culture within the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health that will encourage, recognize, and organize climate change work. Through the grant-funded Initiative, divisions and programs explore how their current mission and activities relate to climate change and how they may further the objectives of the Department's *Five Point Plan to Reduce the Health Impacts of Climate Change*. To gain high-level support, project staff first met with the Department's directors and deputy directors to brief them on the Initiative's visions and goals. To develop a collaborative environment, project staff then launched an intradepartmental workgroup consisting of nominated staff-level employees. The workgroup will identify five concrete goals that can be undertaken by different divisions and programs to support the *Five Point Plan* and develop action plans to meet each goal

The Climate and Health Initiative was supported by CivicSpark fellow Teresa Perez. CivicSpark is a Governor's Initiative AmeriCorps program focused on building local governments' capacity to address climate change. Administered by the Local Government Commission in partnership with the Office of Planning and Research, CivicSpark places fellows with local governments for 11 months to support climate mitigation and adaptation projects. At the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, Teresa assisted Elizabeth Rhoades, the Climate Change Lead, with building support for and launching the Climate and Health Initiative.

Teresa graduated from California State University Long Beach with a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Science and Policy. During her time at CSULB, Teresa served as a myActions intern, promoting the myActions platform, which encourages students to share their sustainability actions. She has also interned at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and has organized volunteer work in Nairobi, Kenya.

Project Description

Within the past few years, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (Public Health) has begun concerted efforts to address the health impacts of climate change. Recognizing its important role as a trusted messenger about the health impacts of climate change and its imperative to protect the public from those impacts, the Department adopted its [*Five Point Plan to Reduce the Health Impacts of Climate Change*](#) in 2014. The *Five Point Plan* features five strategic priority areas related to informing and educating the public, promoting mitigation and adaptation activities county-wide, increasing workforce capacity to address climate change, and adopting best management practices internally to reduce greenhouse gas emissions associated with Public Health's facilities and operations.

Public Health's climate change work began internally with its Climate & Health Workshop Series, created specifically for Public Health's staff by faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Fielding School of Public Health. The workshops served to increase staff knowledge about and engagement with the topic of climate change and set the stage for a concerted, Department-wide effort to address climate change. In discussions facilitated during the Climate & Health Workshop Series, staff expressed interest in

using their professional capabilities to address climate change. At the time, however, the Department lacked a coordinating structure to guide these activities. Effective communication with division directors and middle managers was required in order to provide focus and support to staff efforts.

To address this need, the internal Climate & Health Initiative was envisioned as a comprehensive effort to leverage all branches of Public Health to work on climate change mitigation and resilience efforts. Through this initiative, the Department's divisions are exploring how their activities currently relate to climate change and how they may further the Department's Five Point Plan objectives. The potential benefits of this effort are enormous; with its approximately 4,000 staff serving nearly 10 million residents, the Department is larger than many state health departments.

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Background

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health is responsible for the health and well-being of the 10 million residents of Los Angeles County. Our mission statement is, "To protect health, prevent disease, and promote health and well-being for all persons in the County." The size and scope of the county and its complex demographics, microclimates, and jurisdictional structure make for many challenges and opportunities. The county is one of the most diverse in the country, with people of all incomes and races living in neighborhoods ranging from the highly urbanized, such as downtown Los Angeles, to the very rural, such as the Antelope Valley. With coastal areas, valleys, mountains, and high desert, the county is also home to varying microclimates, which each face distinct climate impacts. A network of 88 cities and unincorporated areas constitutes a multifaceted jurisdictional structure. However, while the size and complexity of the county can be a challenge, it is also a strength: With an extraordinary amount of local climate expertise and many climate-related projects underway, Los Angeles County has a network of climate professionals and available data, such as downscaled projections, that allow for innovative mitigation and adaptation activities.

Five Point Plan

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health adopted its *Five Point Plan to Reduce the Health Impacts of Climate Change* in 2014. The Plan lays out five strategic priority areas for Public Health:

Inform and engage the general public about the nature of climate change and the health co-benefits associated with taking action to reduce carbon emissions.

Promote local planning, land use, transportation, water, and energy policies that reduce carbon emissions and support the design of healthy and sustainable communities.

Provide guidance on climate preparedness to local government and community partners to reduce health risks and create more resilient communities.

Build the capacity of Departmental staff and programs to monitor health impacts, integrate climate preparedness, and improve climate response.

Adopt best management practices to reduce carbon emissions associated with Departmental facilities and internal operations.

The Plan focuses on the use of existing resources and on integrating efforts into current program activities, public education, and advocacy efforts. By taking this approach, new strategies and efforts can be embedded into existing pathways of health protection and education, and the whole public health workforce can be leveraged to address the many health threats that climate change presents.

Approach

The Climate & Health Initiative focused on building support for a workgroup throughout Public Health using bottom-up and top-down approaches in concert. Staff gained support from Departmental leadership by conducting individual meetings—more than 20 in all—to brief the director, health officer, deputy directors, and division and program directors on the Initiative and get feedback from them. In these meetings, department leadership had the opportunity to ask questions and provide feedback on the Initiative's objectives. Staff support was built through the comprehensive Climate & Health Workshop Series, which ran from 2013-2015. Developed by UCLA faculty and doctoral students specifically for public health staff, the workgroup educated staff on the health impacts of climate change, building awareness and an open dialogue on the topic. Building this broad base of awareness and support for the topic laid the groundwork for launching the workgroup.

Project Difficulties

The main challenge facing the project is limited staff capacity. Public Health has one full-time staff person dedicated to climate change, and additionally utilized a CivicSpark fellow to assist with the administration of the Climate & Health Initiative and with undertaking internal outreach. Many public health departments across the state and the country do not have a staff person dedicated to climate change, making these types of undertakings very challenging or virtually impossible.

Technical Assistance

The Governor's Office of Planning and Research (OPR) serves as an intergovernmental facilitator to support the exchange of information and the ultimate development of guidance and resources to support local and regional activities related to longer term climate change goals. OPR will continue to support ongoing State efforts that would also support the County's efforts in the areas of climate and health. The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health looks forward to working with OPR in the future to advance its goals of leverage public health staff to address the health impacts of climate change.

Identified Paths to Success and Replicable Elements

Various strategies have allowed for the success of the Climate & Health Initiative, including:

Building support through the workgroup using multiple pathways

The Climate and Health Initiative Team built support for the initiative using both top-down and bottom-up approaches, as described above. Gaining support for the Initiative from both staff and leadership is critical so that staff are interested and engaged in furthering climate work that is consistent with priorities endorsed by the department's leadership.

Using a plan as an organizing framework

The *Five Point Plan to Reduce the Health Impacts of Climate Change* serves as the organizing framework for all of Public Health's climate change work. By outlining five strategic priority areas for local health department intervention, the *Five Point Plan* provides a starting point for divisions and programs to envision how climate change intersects with their work.

Operating workgroup using a consensus-oriented decision-making process

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health has extensive experience in facilitating intra- and interdepartmental workgroups. For instance, the Public Health-led Healthy Design Workgroup (HDW) works across various County Departments to promote healthy and equitable community environments. The consensus-oriented decision-making model used by the HDW has also been applied to the Climate & Health Initiative. Consensus-oriented decision-making fosters members' involvement in and ownership over the decisions made by the workgroup.

Tying workgroup goals to existing priorities

The Climate and Health Initiative workgroup promotes cross-program collaboration on climate change work. Linking workgroup activities to the existing mission, priorities, and activities of Public Health's programs helps to strengthen buy-in from each of the programs.