

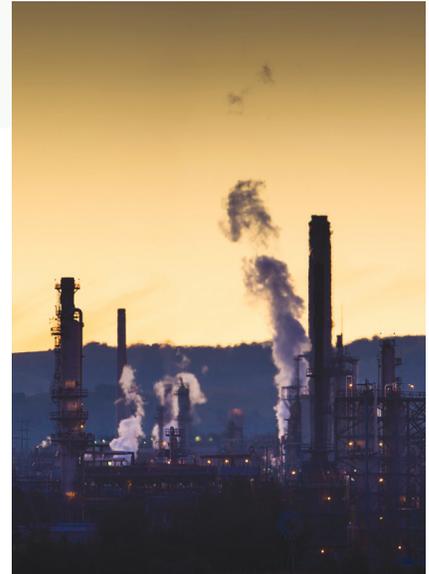
Health Department Brings Health and Equity Lens to Contra Costa County Climate Action Plan

In April of 2012, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors initiated a process to develop a Climate Action Plan that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the unincorporated areas of the county. Contra Costa sits toward the north end of the San Francisco Bay Area and is home to four oil refineries and 39 other industrial facilities that handle large amounts of hazardous materials. For over a decade, Contra Costa Health Services (CCHS) has been tackling the environmental issues and health inequities faced by the communities that live in the shadow of these facilities, with dedicated staff to focus on environmental justice and community engagement. Recognizing that climate change would affect these same communities the most, a small group of people had been discussing what they could do to address the issue. The proposed Climate Action Plan offered the opportunity they'd been looking for.

"We recognized that climate change is going to hit hardest the communities in Contra Costa County already dealing with health disparities," said Michael Kent, the Contra Costa County Hazardous Materials Ombudsman. At the same time, Kent and the rest of the group believed that county strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions had the potential to *improve* conditions for county residents. The group, made up of public health staff who work on issues ranging from environmental justice, indoor air quality, and epidemiology to the built environment, decided to analyze the health co-benefits of activities that might be pursued under the Climate Action Plan.

They felt their analysis would do two things: 1) support passage of the Climate Action Plan, by helping county supervisors and the public understand the connection between climate change and health; and 2) make sure that the plan prioritized people's health and reducing health inequities. They did an analysis of health co-benefits in 10 areas, looking at health benefit, the potential to reduce health disparities, and at whether the strategy also offered some adaptation benefit.

"The biggest challenge in doing the analysis was the methodology," remarks Kent, "ideally, you'd want to quantify this stuff." The group ended up doing qualitative analyses instead. They felt that there was not sufficient quantitative information across their 10 areas. They were also concerned that the models used in the available quantitative analyses were not a good fit for the circumstances in Contra Costa.



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CCHS has long been a thought leader, substantially contributing to increased focus on addressing the social determinants of health by local health departments. When they undertook their analysis of the Climate Action Plan, says Kent, “I couldn’t find anybody who’d done anything this comprehensive. As far as I know, it’s the only one that’s been done that has looked at all these areas for all different types of greenhouse gas reduction measures.” He strongly believes, however, that this type of analysis is something other departments could do.

The group approached the Department of Conservation and Development, charged with developing the Climate Action Plan, before ever starting their analysis, establishing a relationship that ensured that their report was well received, and the recommendations embraced. The effort had clear benefits in the development of the Climate Action Plan. “Our analysis helped the department see that, with not much tweaking, you could turn it from a general measure into one that could make a real difference to address health disparities.” For example when choosing between solar panels and weatherization to reduce energy use, weatherization was the clear winner from a health benefits perspective. And making sure weatherization support was directed first to low income communities could make a further difference for disadvantaged families by giving them cleaner indoor air, warmer winters and lower energy bills.

While the Climate Action Plan awaits approval at the county, the group from CCHS has been active presenting at workshops and meetings within the county, in the Bay Area region, and at the State, continuing to draw attention to the health impacts and opportunities of climate change. They’re also building connections within Contra Costa, and looking at what they, from within the health department, can do next to help move the needle on climate change. After all, insists Kent, “If you do all of the things that make sense to mitigate climate change, and it turns out current dire climate change predictions *don’t* occur, where do you end up? With communities that are more walkable, greener, cleaner, and more equitable.”

For more information:

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