

Planning for Climate Change and Public Health: Santa Clara County Public Health Department's Case Story



This is one in a series of Climate and Health Case Stories that highlight how public health departments in California are responding to climate change as an emerging public health issue.

Climate Change and Health in Santa Clara County

Santa Clara County with over 1.8 million residents is the most populated county in the Bay Area Region. According to scientific projections, climate change will bring more frequent extreme heat events, worse air pollution and sea level rise, which will cause residential and commercial displacement, and more coastal and riverine flooding from extreme storms. These effects will have a significant impact on public health and affect the area's most vulnerable populations disproportionately, including children, elders, people with chronic diseases, outdoor workers, people living in poverty, and some communities of color.

"The effects of climate change are at our front door. Like all health threats, these effects are experiencedin our cities and neighborhoods. And, like any threat to our community's health, local public health departments must play an active role in understanding the nature and course of climate change and take action to mitigate and adapt to its consequences in order to protect the health of its community."

*-Dr. Sara Cody,
Santa Clara County
Public Health Officer*

Bringing Public Health into Climate Change

Santa Clara County Public Health Department (SCCPHD) has a multi-pronged approach to climate change that emerged from its Center for Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention. Initially, department staff were exposed to climate issues through programs, organizations, and collaboratives that focus on the upstream determinants of health. Early work included strategies to increase active transportation and food access, which have co-benefits for improving community health and reducing greenhouse gas (GHG).

Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention staff participated in the county's Climate Action Team, which created a

plan focused on reducing GHG. One of the department's most important engagement outcomes emerged from its Health in All Policies (HiAP) efforts, which included creating a health element for the county's *General Plan* with specific language addressing climate

change. The health element is instrumental in framing other aspects of the *General Plan*, which will inform the county's overall operations and land use planning for the next 10 to 20 years.



2012-2015 Public Health Strategic Plan

Goal 3: Establish a departmental focus on environmental issues related to climate change and sustainability.

Objective 1. Increase community awareness and preparedness for the public health effects of climate change/global warming.

Objective 2. Engage in county and city efforts to improve the environment, including sustainability, transportation, and development initiatives.

Objective 3. Promote the inclusion of health in all policies in county and cities general plans and encourage land policies that support and promote health.

Objective 4. Conduct health impact assessments to determine the positive and negative health impacts of policies related to the physical environment.

Through engagement with external partners the department has been able to provide education about the relationship between public health and climate change, as well as advocate for a stronger public health focus in the county's planning efforts.

Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Activities

The Santa Clara County Department of Public Health participates in the following activities:

- Silicon Valley 2.0: Santa Clara County Office of Sustainability manages this regional climate planning initiative to minimize climate change impacts and to reduce local GHG generation.
- Santa Clara Climate Change Action Team: An interdepartmental team that developed the county's *Climate Action Plan*. The team is led by the county's climate change and sustainability manager.
- Santa Clara Food Systems Alliance: A county-wide collaborative of food system leaders
- Safe Routes to Schools Program: A program to make walking and biking to school fun, healthy, safer, and accessible to all who chose to walk and bike to school.
- Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiatives-Built Environment Committee: A regional group of local health departments collaborating to eliminate health inequities.
- Grand Boulevard Initiative: A regional collaboration to revitalize the El Camino Real corridor.

Bringing Climate Change into Public Health

The department's leadership team recognized climate change as an emerging issue in the public health field and wanted to prioritize its inclusion in strategic planning efforts. In the *2012-2015 Public Health Strategic Plan*, a specific climate change goal and attendant objectives were included. This both codified the department's existing climate and health efforts, and provided tangible steps to bring climate change perspectives into its programs and planning.

Building on the strategic plan, the department began a process to create a comprehensive climate action plan (CAP) to guide its approach to climate change from a public health perspective. Instead of addressing the issue in a disjointed fashion, the plan creates a roadmap to fully integrate the challenges presented by climate change into programming and operations. The drafting of the CAP was spurred on by leadership's desire to follow through with its 2012-2015 Public Health Strategic Plan goal. Throughout the entire process, the content was shared with the department's executive leadership to ensure the CAP was in alignment with organizational priorities. While drafting its Climate Action Plan, Santa Clara Public Health communicated with the California Department of Public Health (CDPH), and the San Francisco and Los Angeles public health departments to see how this work was being done by others. The CAP process developed a well-rounded set of viewpoints from key internal and external stakeholders and occurred in three phases.

Phase 1: The department leadership formed a working group to create a hub for its climate and health activities and planning. The group pulled together staff from across the department, from the public health officer and other executive management, and others from the Nursing, Emergency Preparedness, and Chronic Disease and Prevention divisions, and epidemiologists. Members also came from the Department of Environmental Health (DEH), which is an independent department. Representatives from the consulting agency providing a health perspective to the Silicon 2.0 initiative also joined the work group.

To orient the public health working group members, experts in the climate and health field were invited to present climate change science, its health impacts, and the current state, regional, and county climate planning efforts. The group discussed the many ways climate change will affect their work and how health programs can prepare for the present and projected changes. An effort to clarify the language of climate change and health, and create a standard vocabulary for talking and writing on the issue, provided common ground.

Phase 2: Once a baseline level of knowledge was established, the working group began an iterative process to develop a comprehensive climate action plan. A consulting agency facilitated a half-day session to develop the vision and direction for the CAP. After broad range goals and objectives were drafted, they were pared down to align with agency resources. Staff members were assigned to each objective to identify activities and prepare a draft work plan. The working group met quarterly to check in with the staff's assigned planning efforts.

Phase 3: Once the draft CAP was written, the logistical details were developed honing in on timelines, necessary staffing, and other key resources.

Moving Forward

The draft Climate CAP will guide future climate and health efforts. Without dedicated funding, staff members are integrating climate change activities into their existing work, and beginning to move forward on the CAP elements. New e-learning modules for climate change and health education are being developed for required staff training. In the Emergency Preparedness Division, a plan is being developed for heat events which are becoming stronger and more frequent. Epidemiologists are developing new criteria for identifying populations most vulnerable to the projected health effects from climate change. This information is being overlaid with the locations in the county where wildfires, extreme heat, and air quality are most likely to impact. Finally, in an effort to hone its focus and clarify its priorities to move climate and health work forward, the department is refining its *Public Health Strategic Plan* to include more specific goals and objectives. Creating more specificity will help leadership advocate for increased resources to carry out the goals and objectives in the CAP.

Public Health Climate Action Plan

The draft *Climate Action Plan* has an 18-month timeline.

The goals include:

- Raising awareness both within and outside the health department;
- Establishing tracking processes to monitor the health impacts from climate change;
- Increasing partnerships with local jurisdictions and agencies working on climate issues;
- Integrating climate change strategies into current and future public health plans; and
- Decreasing the department's GHG emissions.

There are still many unanswered questions, such as what tables does the public health department need to have a seat at if it is going to be the lead on climate and health issues, and how will emerging climate justice and health equity issues, including the need to build community capacity for adapting to climate change, be addressed? Climate change is projected to affect individuals and communities with the least resources more deeply. How can health equity continue to be an important priority for health departments and what new strategies can be taken to address them?

The department has plans to leverage existing relationships and create new ones, like connecting more deeply with local universities. These relationships provide climate change expertise to help implement the work required by the department's *Climate Action Plan*.

Lessons Learned

- Do what you can with what you have and don't wait for dedicated resources to do the work.
- Staff participation in existing regional climate change efforts is a helpful starting point.
- Provide essential agency leadership to support and empower staff to identify and prioritize climate and health strategies.
- Put climate change in public health strategic plans, even if a deliverable is broad and non-specific, to create momentum to include climate change in diverse health programs and planning efforts.
- Learn and share with other organizations addressing climate change and public health, as the field is still new and emerging, and there are few content experts.
- Fill the huge gap between where health departments need to be to effectively address climate change and where they are now.
- Develop the expertise to grapple with climate and health issues, and prepare for the next wave of public health leaders and practitioners who will bring a more interdisciplinary approach with environmental health sciences, city planning, and public policy.
- Create new partnerships to effectively address climate and health threats; the work cannot be limited to only the public health department.

Resources

[2015-2018 Santa Clara County Public Health Department Strategic Plan](#)

[Santa Clara Public Health Department County Climate Action Plan](#)

[CalBRACE Project - California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity](#)

[Climate and Health Initiative - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[Santa Clara County Climate Action Plan for Operations and Facilities](#)

[Santa Clara County Climate Adaptation and Resiliency – Silicon Valley 2.0 Project](#)

[Health Element of Santa Clara County General Plan](#)

Photo: Courtesy of Santa Clara County Public Health Department. SCCPHD Staff - Bike to Work Day.