



King County

King County Board of Health

Staff Report

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Subject

Implementing a Public Health – Seattle and King County Climate and Health Equity Initiative

Summary

In recognition of the important role Public Health – Seattle and King County (PHSKC) has in responding and adapting to the impacts of climate change, PHSKC launched the Climate and Health Equity Initiative (C+HEI) in January 2022 to centrally coordinate interdivisional efforts and facilitate collaboration with other King County agencies and community partners engaged in climate change work. To these ends, C+HEI centers its focus on the development and delivery of core services in three defined areas where public health has the greatest capacity to support efforts to address climate change, including:

- **Climate and Health Data and Surveillance** – to improve the ability to anticipate, respond, and adapt to the effects of climate change and increasing community resilience and health equity,
- **Climate Change and Health Risk Communication** – to increase the ability for all King County residents to take proactive measures to increase their preparedness and ability to adapt to the effects of climate change, and
- **Climate Adaptation and Mitigation** – to prioritize the delivery of services to communities where the needs are greatest, contributing to a more equitable and climate resilient future.

It will take time to assemble all the necessary resources to build a complete C+HEI to carry out the full scope of the PHSKC's *Blueprint for Addressing Climate Change and Health* report (Blueprint). Phase I includes near-term work that began in 2021 and will continue through the end of 2022 to develop an operational plan and respond to ongoing climate events. Phases II and III will iteratively build on earlier work as PHSKC, partner agencies, and communities increase their capacity and resources become available.

Background

Climate change has been recognized as a global health emergency by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹ and by multiple public health and medical professional organizations in the U.S. The inevitable health impacts of climate change have already begun to arrive in the

Puget Sound region, where in recent years residents have come to expect days or weeks of unhealthy air quality due to wildfire smoke and increasingly common summer heat waves that endanger health. The impacts of climate change affect all King County residents, but not all residents experience the impacts in the same way. Particularly, lower socio-economic status areas and communities of color are at increased risk because of a higher prevalence of underlying health conditions as well as environmental and social risk factors.

PHSKC has a vital role in protecting communities from the increasing and inequitable health impacts of climate change. This includes keeping the most impacted people in communities safe, building climate and community resilience, documenting, and raising awareness of the health impacts of climate change, and supporting policy and practice change to adapt to and mitigate the threat of climate change on overall population health.

Climate & Health Equity Initiative (C+HEI)

In recognition of the important role PHSKC has in responding and adapting to the impacts of climate change, PHSKC launched the Climate & Health Equity Initiative (C+HEI) to centrally coordinate interdivisional collaboration and facilitate collaboration with other King County agencies and community partners engaged in climate change work. C+HEI was launched in January 2022 to take on the work of implementing the 2018 *Blueprint for Addressing Climate Change and Health* report (Blueprint).

While it will take time to assemble all the necessary resources to carry out the full scope of the Blueprint, C+HEI is the first component of a phased approach. Phase I includes near-term work that began in 2021 and will continue through the end of 2022. Phases II and III will iteratively build on earlier work as PHSKC, partner agencies, and communities increase their capacity and resources become available. Phases are as follows:

- **Phase I: Capacity-Building and Emergency Response**, in which C+HEI will develop an operational plan to implement the Blueprint, engage in near term health-related King County Strategic Climate Action Plan (SCAP) actions, and respond to ongoing climate events in partnership with community organizations and other County agencies.
- **Phase II: Foundational Implementation**, in which C+HEI will implement the highest-priority actions defined in the operational plan developed during Phase I, deepen partnerships with community organizations and other County agencies, expand engagement on health related SCAP actions, and continue to respond to ongoing climate events in partnership with community.
- **Phase III: Full Implementation and Evolution**, in which C+HEI will fully implement the Blueprint core functions, strategies, and actions, engage on all the health related SCAP action that promote equity, improve health in partnership with frontline communities, and deepen and broaden work in strategies and core functions from Phases I and II while incorporating new actions.

Administratively positioned within the Environmental Health Services Division, C+HEI is a departmental initiative that draws upon the wealth of subject matter expertise from staff across PHSKC's divisions and programs. There is a recognition that it is exposure to environmental conditions and a collective ability to cope with the changing conditions of the environment that

determine the degree to which climate change will impact public health. C+HEI focuses on the anticipation and reduction of potential adverse health impacts resulting from climate change in the region, while working to address existing disparities that contribute to the disproportionate impact of climate change on frontline communities.

To these ends, C+HEI centers its focus on the development and delivery of core services in three defined areas where PHSKC has the greatest capacity to support efforts to address climate change, including – data and surveillance, public health risk communications, and identification and development of climate adaptation strategies to reduce the impacts of climate change on human health.

Climate and Health Data and Surveillance - PHSKC maintains access to robust data on population health in King County. However, to date these datasets have not been optimized in the context of climate change to assess the causal pathways of climate change and health impacts. C+HEI is working across the department's divisions and other partners to identify community health indicators to enhance public health surveillance capacity to assess the health impacts of climate change and facilitate data informed decision making. The goal is to improve communities' ability to anticipate, respond, and adapt to the effects of climate change and increasing community resilience and health equity.

Climate Change and Health Risk Communication - Risk communication is intended to supply the public with information they need to make informed, independent judgements about risks to health, safety, and the environment.² With the diversity of King County's population, climate change messaging must be translated and delivered in culturally appropriate ways to reach all communities. C+HEI is working to help facilitate and coordinate the development of climate change and health messaging in culturally appropriate ways to ensure equitable access to credible and actionable information. The goal is to increase the ability for all King County residents to take proactive measures to increase their preparedness and ability to adapt to the effects of climate change.

Climate Adaptation and Mitigation - The impacts of climate change are already being experienced and extreme weather and climate-related events are expected to become more frequent. Impacting infrastructure, ecosystems, and social systems that provide essential services to communities³. However, communities that have been historically marginalized - including black, indigenous and people of color, low-income families, and people experiencing homelessness - will bear a disproportionate burden of these impacts due to limited ability to cope with the effects of climate change. C+HEI is working with partners throughout PHSKC and across county agencies with the goal to develop climate adaptation actions and strategies that prioritize the delivery of services to communities where the needs are greatest, contributing to a more equitable and climate resilient future.

Example of Current Efforts in the Focused Areas

Climate and Health Data and Surveillance

- C+HEI is working to identify key climate and health equity metrics to follow with a data monitoring and surveillance plan. C+HEI has established a multi-divisional, cross-agency climate and health data advisory group comprised of program managers, epidemiologists, social research scientists, and academic professionals to develop the 2023-2024 climate data and surveillance plan. The 2022 focus is to finalize the data plan and begin routine surveillance for 1-3 climate + health indicators.

Climate Change and Health Risk Communication

- C+HEI has worked with the PHSKC Office of the Director's Communications team to print and disseminate copies of the "Stay Safe in the Heat" and "Climate Changes Health" comic zines, using Foundational Public Health Service Funding. These materials have been translated into multiple languages and developed to deliver key climate and health information to a diverse audience in a culturally relevant manner. Staff are working with numerous county departments and community partners to ensure these resources are widely distributed. The Communication team also has set up four weeks of advertising about how to "Stay Safe in the Heat" with 11 different outlets for a mix of media sizes and social media content.
- C+HEI initiated a climate demonstration site to develop a Community Clean Air Ambassador Pilot Program from National Association of City and County Health Officials (NACCHO) funding. This pilot project consisted of partnering with community-based organizations in the co-creation of an interactive educational infographic to raise awareness on indoor air quality and proactive ways for residents to protect their health during wildfire smoke events.

Climate Adaptation and Mitigation

- C+HEI staff lead the PHSKC's fan filter kit (BFF) distribution effort, distributing kits to residents for wildfire smoke mitigation. Working with 7 community-based organizations, this team distributed is set to distribute approximately 1,600 units in 2022. **This project recently received the King County Executive Office's Equity Award for Innovation!**
- C+HEI collaborated with PHSKC's Preparedness Section and the National Weather Service – Seattle to develop extreme heat guidance and threshold recommendations for coordinating regional efforts in response to future extreme heat events.
- C+HEI submitted a project proposal for \$2.75 million under the FEMA Hazards Mitigation Grant Program to conduct climate adaptive community health modeling that can assess pathways of public health impacts attributable to climate driven hazards and provide analytical data on anticipated economic costs of human health impacts. If awarded, modeling efforts will work with three priority communities to identify key climate and health equity indicators that address community resiliency to climate change impacts, combine multiple datasets to inform community-centered climate and health equity needs, and identify capital improvements necessary to increase community health and climate adaptive capacity.

Among public health and medical professional organizations, there is no question that climate change is a public health emergency. It has often not been recognized as such because of the insidious nature of the human health impacts. King County's leadership in acknowledging and confronting climate change through the SCAP and the Blueprint provide

a path to address its impacts. With increased climate and health equity capacity and collaboration with County agencies and other partners, PHSKC can better promote and protect the health of King County residents in the face of climate change, while centering equity and serving communities most impacted by the climate crisis.

References

¹ World Health Organization, Climate Change and Health Fact Sheet [[Link](#)]

² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Risk Communication Fact Sheet [[Link](#)]

³ U.S. Global Research Program, 4th National Climate Assessment [[Link](#)]