



Taking Action on Health Equity in Environmental Public Health: Five Strategies for Organizational Change

*Environmental Health Services
BC Centre for Disease Control*

Equity-integrated environmental health practice requires both organizational capacity and practitioner skills. Environmental health officers (EHOs) have an important role in addressing health inequities as part of their consultation, enforcement, and educational activities. Taking action on health inequities also requires priority-setting at the organizational level, with clear support for action on health equity from all levels, including local managers, regional directors, and health authority leadership.

This resource for managers and directors provides suggestions and ideas for integrating an equity lens into environmental public health practice at the organizational level.

Health equity exists when everyone has a fair opportunity to reach their full health potential without disadvantages caused by their social, economic, or environmental circumstances.

Health determinants such as geographic isolation, socioeconomic status, education and literacy, mental health, language, and culture, can create barriers to compliance and lead to health inequities across all areas of environmental health practice.

Five Strategies for Organizational Change



1 Apply an equity lens within a health protection mandate

EHOs are in a good position to directly address a number of equity issues. Housing, food, and drinking water quality can be improved through the enactment and enforcement of public health regulations, but also through advocacy and health promotion efforts. Responsiveness to community complaints, advocacy for improved regulations, and approaches to address inequities can have far-reaching effects on the health of individuals and populations.

An equity lens is a values-based approach to practice rather than a specific skill or set of actions. Equity-integrated environmental public health practices are beginning to emerge. At an organizational level, managers and senior leadership can support these initiatives in the following ways:

- ✓ Incorporate health equity training in schools of environmental health, professional development programs, and inservice education.
- ✓ Provide EHOs with clear roles and expectations so they know how to factor equity considerations into discretionary decision-making.
- ✓ Support the use and development of tools (visual aids, translated documents) to address common barriers in areas such as food premises.
- ✓ Encourage EHOs to collaborate inside and outside public health to bring an environmental health perspective to issues such as housing or healthy built environments. Recognize these efforts.

2 Build individual and organizational capacity

Equity presents a wide range of issues—economic stability, education, safe and affordable housing, food security, culture, gender, and more. For example, ethnic food premises inspections may involve language barriers or unfamiliar foods and preparation processes. As well, there is no standard equity curriculum in EHO training, and individual skills vary widely.

In addition to filling gaps in knowledge, EHOs require tools to address health equity. Managers and senior leadership can ensure that equity issues are consistently considered:

- ✓ Assess demand and interest for inservice training, webinars, and informal information sharing on specific tools or implementation approaches.
- ✓ Identify tools and resources, such as Ontario's Health Equity Impact Assessment (HEIA) tool, to increase individual and organizational capacity to address healthy equity.
- ✓ Articulate a clear mandate for equity-oriented practices in environmental health programs based upon provincial and regional health frameworks, strategic plans, and service plans that highlight equity as a priority area.

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3 Recognize the complexity of health equity and social issues

EHOs don't always have a colleague to consult and must rely on their personal experiences, values, and powers of creativity to resolve client issues. EHOs may adapt timelines, draw in unlikely partners, or engage in "unconventional negotiations" to resolve issues. Incomplete, unclear, or inflexible legislation, regulation, or policy (i.e., that which does not provide opportunities for discretion) can be a significant barrier to action on health equity issues. Dealing with complex issues often requires time, skilled people, and funds to carry out programming and any or all of these three elements may be missing in tight budgetary environments.

Managers and senior leadership can recognize the efforts of EHOs going "above and beyond" to problem-solve and address individual barriers and challenges:

- ✓ Consider restructuring performance evaluations to incorporate time spent supporting or advocating for vulnerable or marginalized people or addressing unique problems or situations.
- ✓ Learn from the frontline perspective by encouraging EHOs to document the challenges they face, the efforts they take to address individual and systemic barriers, and the equity-related challenges they witness. Use this data for decision-making and planning.
- ✓ Look for ways to change policies and regulations that act as systemic barriers, e.g., areas where EHOs may lack the ability to act due to lack of legislated authority, while still ensuring protection of public health.

These kinds of changes may require a shift in priorities as well as assessment of implementation capacity.

4 Foster collaboration and leadership

EHOs' personal and professional networks are critical avenues to connect clients with required services. Effective collaboration requires good analytic skills to identify root problems, knowledge of the skills and services available, and strategies to mobilize key partners.

Managers and senior leadership can develop structures for inter-agency and intra-agency collaboration—including equity-focused networks and working groups—in several ways:

- ✓ Designate environmental health staff as "field ambassadors" for health equity and identify staff from other divisions as "go-to" resources for EHOs.
- ✓ Coordinate opportunities for collaboration with different public health professionals, such as dietitians, social workers, and health promoters.
- ✓ Take on the role of an "executive equity champion" to help embed equity into the organization's strategic direction.

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5 Integrate Equity into Evaluation and Reporting

Equity-oriented practices in the field of environmental public health are emergent. Evaluation to assess outcomes associated with different strategies will help to identify best practices and measure long-term outcomes with respect to compliance, health hazards, and inequities.

The opportunity to share insights and practices is important for EHOs. Organizations can support communication about equity issues in several ways:

- ✓ Integrate the concept of health equity into program plans, inspection quotas, organizational strategies, and divisional reports.
- ✓ Provide opportunities for EHOs to share their experiences and knowledge with others (e.g., at staff meetings) and recognize the work of individual EHOs to promote equity.
- ✓ Encourage opportunities for sharing equity practices in formal working groups, conferences, and regional and national organizations.

LEARN MORE

Primers on equity and environmental public health practice, written for practitioners, managers, and program directors. Available from <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/health-equity-environmental-health/equity-and-eph-handbook>

1. **Five things to know about equity in EPH**, highlights the ways that equity intersects with EPH practice and illustrates how an equity lens might be used.
2. **Areas of EPH Practice Impacted by the Social Determinants of Health** illustrates how equity issues impact different areas of EPH practice.
3. **Equity in EPH Practice** discusses ways to integrate an equity lens into practice.
4. **Health Equity Tools** (2013) is an inventory of 35 tools to support program managers and planners apply a health equity lens to service delivery. Available from Equity Lens in Public Health: <http://www.uvic.ca/research/projects/elph/assets/docs/Health%20Equity%20Tools%20Inventory.pdf>

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