



How can health impact assessment help Policy-makers?

Takeaways:

- Health impact assessment (HIA) allows policymakers to consider how a new proposal—development of a new transit system, for example—affects health.
- HIA can help marshal community support for a project, facilitate collaboration across sectors and offer benefits for businesses.
- There are at least 120 HIAs that have been completed or are in progress in 26 states and Washington, D.C.

Overview

Preventable health problems, including many cases of heart disease, diabetes, asthma and injuries, are taking a huge toll on American families. For the first time in U.S. history, data suggest that today's children may live shorter lives than their parents. These problems also threaten our nation's economic vitality. Heart disease and diabetes alone now account for more than 700,000 deaths in the U.S. annually and cost the nation over \$650 billion in medical expenses, disability, missed work and financial losses associated with premature death.

WHAT IS HEALTH IMPACT ASSESSMENT?

A health impact assessment (HIA) can help policymakers envision the health consequences of new policies. When drafting new laws and

regulations, building a major roadway or developing a school curriculum, policymakers can capitalize on hidden opportunities to improve health, save on health-related costs and use limited resources more wisely. HIA is a practical, evidence-driven tool to accomplish these goals. Many large lending banks and major industries such as oil, gas and mining are adopting HIA to improve health, control costs and build trust with communities.

HIA brings together scientific data, health expertise and public input to identify the potential health effects of a new proposal and to help craft policy recommendations that minimize risks and capitalize on opportunities to improve health. HIA gives federal, tribal, state and local leaders the information they need to make better decisions today to prevent health problems in their communities tomorrow.

The basic HIA process can be readily adapted to fit the scope, resources and timeline of a given decision. In a recent survey by the Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts designed to promote the use of HIA as a decision-making tool for policymakers, HIA practitioners reported that most HIAs take from six weeks to a year to complete and cost \$10,000 to \$200,000—a fraction of the time and resources that often go into environmental studies and permitting procedures.

HIA also shows promise as a way to help policymakers who are facing difficult budgetary decisions. For example, the New Hampshire Center

for Public Policy Studies is conducting an HIA to shed light on the health implications of proposed budget changes for 2011 in order to help legislators make the difficult choices necessary to balance the state budget.

BENEFITS AND BEST USES OF HIA

- **HIA can build community support for a project.** By identifying and addressing community concerns, HIA helps reduce conflicts that can delay projects. For example, an Alaska Native community considered suing to block oil and gas lease sales in their traditional hunting areas. Instead, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) worked with the local government to complete an HIA, which resulted in new protections that addressed community concerns. Since then, the BLM has begun using HIA in similar planning and permitting decisions.
- **HIA facilitates collaboration across sectors.** HIA provides a structured, pragmatic way for public health practitioners and researchers to collaborate with officials in other agencies and sectors, ensuring that these officials have the health data they need to make better decisions.
- **HIA benefits business.** Companies and lenders are turning to HIA as a small and prudent investment in the long-term success of initiatives. The International Finance Corporation and many large banks now use HIA in their process of approving large development loans. Trade organizations, such as the International Committee on Mining and Metals and the International Association of Oil and Gas Producers, have handbooks on HIA, and many individual companies are adopting their own standards for HIA.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In September 2011, the National Research Council released a report that offers concrete guidance for

decision makers on ways to identify and address the potential impact on health of proposed projects or policies in sectors outside of health and health care at the federal, state, tribal and local levels, including the private sector. The NRC was the third national body to promote and recommend the use of HIA this year, following the [National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council](#) and the [Institute of Medicine committee on Public Health Strategies to Improve Health](#). The NRC report is a good starting point for agencies interested in determining where there are opportunities to apply HIA in decisions that have a potential for significant health effects. Policymakers at all levels of government have many opportunities to incorporate HIA and build healthier policies:

- Government officials should use HIA for important decisions outside the health sector—including transportation, housing and urban planning, educational programming, agricultural policy and energy and natural resource projects—to minimize unnecessary risks and unanticipated costs and to help create healthier communities.
- Executive branch agencies with major infrastructure projects, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation, should consider HIA to integrate health considerations in current and future initiatives.

Adapted from the Health Impact Project report: “Health Impact Assessment: Bringing Public Health Data to Decision Making” by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts, December, 2010.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [Health Impact Project \(RWJF/ Pew Charitable Trusts\)](#)
- [CDC Healthy Places \(CDC\)](#)
- [Human Impact Partners](#)
- [National Research Council report on HIA](#)