
A DISCUSSION FEATURING:

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Associate Commissioner for Health
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FORUM SESSION ANNOUNCEMENT

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2010
11:45AM–12:15PM—Lunch
12:15PM–2:00PM—Discussion

LOCATION
Reserve Officers Association
One Constitution Avenue, NE
Congressional Hall of Honor
Fifth Floor
(Across from the Dirksen Senate Office Building)

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Increasingly, policymakers recognize that opportunities to improve health and prevent the need for expensive services lie beyond the health care system. Although access to good health care can make a big difference to the health of many people, comprehensive approaches to improving the public’s health can have a much greater impact. From economists to epidemiologists, a wide range of people are addressing the problem of poor health on many fronts.  

The broad-based approaches being considered go by various names—including public health, prevention and health promotion, and health in all policies—and attempt to take into consideration all of the many factors that can affect people’s health. Such factors include the indoor and outdoor environments in which people spend their time; the structure and layout of the communities where people work, live, and go to school; the kinds of facilities and services that people have access to and how they use them; and the policies that shape their workplaces, schools, and towns. For example, those involved in tackling the national epidemic of obesity consider everything from zoning to transportation systems to food availability to where and how people spend their leisure time, things that may seem at first to be unrelated to health.

Health impact assessment (HIA) is a growing practice used to support and implement broad-based approaches to improving health. It is commonly defined as “a combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population.” The practice is intended to bring a health focus to other sectors, such as agriculture, energy, and transportation, where the effects of the proposed action on health might not be adequately considered—or considered at all. These assessments are seen as a vehicle for supporting policymaking that advances the public’s health by making explicit the health effects of the various alternatives under consideration. Public health experts believe that health impact assessments “offer great potential for promoting health by encouraging decisions that protect and enhance health and health equity.”

The basic steps in conducting an HIA include: identifying projects or policies for which an assessment would be useful; selecting which health effects to consider; assessing which people may be affected and how; recommending actions to promote positive or mitigate adverse health effects; presenting the results to decision-makers; determining the effect of the HIA on the decision; and, ultimately, evaluating the impact of the decision on health.
Various clearinghouses and bibliographies list hundreds of HIAs from around the world and across the United States that have been completed or are in progress. In the United States, assessments are done at all levels from federal legislation to community projects, and the diverse array includes such topics as menu labeling, housing and other land developments, transportation, rental vouchers, and after-school programs.

This Forum session will provide an introduction to health impact assessments, examine several examples and their effect on policy and health outcomes, and discuss future opportunities and challenges for this burgeoning health policy tool.

KEY QUESTIONS

• What are the various components of and approaches to the practice of health impact assessment? Why is it done? When is it called for? What accounts for the growing interest in conducting HIAs?

• How are HIAs done? How are they similar to or different from other kinds of analyses to support health policymaking? What are the major challenges to developing these assessments?

• Who is conducting HIAs and who is using them? Where are they being done—which countries, states, and communities provide interesting examples? What has been the effect on policy in those locales?

• What does the future hold for HIAs? What are their implications for legislation and policy at the national, state, and community levels?

SPEAKERS

Aaron Wernham, MD, is director of The Health Impact Project in The Pew Health Group at The Pew Charitable Trusts. He will provide an introduction to health impact assessments, illustrated with examples in which he has been involved. Catherine L. Ross, PhD, is director of the Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development and Harry West Professor in the School of City and Regional Planning at the Georgia Tech College of Architecture. She will describe some of the numerous health impact assessments with which she has been involved, with a particular emphasis on their effects on policy. Suzanne K. Condon, MSM, is associate commissioner for health and director of the Bureau of Environmental Health in the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. She will discuss her state’s efforts to conduct health impact assessments, focusing on the challenges...
encountered when endeavoring to develop the relationships and structures necessary to support this type of cross-cutting work.

ENDNOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of broad-based approaches to improving health, see the related Forum background paper “High Hopes: Public Health Approaches to Reducing the Need for Health Care” (Background Paper No. 78, September 27, 2010); available at www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2821.

2. For examples of communities taking a broad-based approach to improving health, see the materials from the November 5, 2010, Forum session “Unusual Suspects: Focusing on Nonmedical Determinants to Improve the Nation’s Health”; available at www.nhpf.org/library/details.cfm/2833.

3. For this definition, a basic introduction, and a helpful compilation of resources on health impact assessments, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention webpage; available at www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces/hia.htm.

4. Health impact assessments are frequently compared with the environmental impact statements required under the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (P.L. 91-190) for federal government agency actions that will affect the quality of the human environment. They describe the proposed agency action and a range of alternatives and analyze the environmental effects of each.