

# Mobilizing the Workforce to Address Climate Change: Los Angeles County Public Health Department Case Story



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

## Climate Change and Health in Los Angeles County

Los Angeles County is located in the South Coast Region. With nearly 10 million residents it is the most populous county in California and the United States. In Los Angeles County, climate change is projected to increase the risk of heat waves, air pollution, wildfires, water insecurity, severe storms, and flooding from sea level rise and storm surges. These effects

*“This isn’t a hopeless situation. Things can be done to mitigate the effects of climate change.”*

*Angelo Bellomo,  
Director of Environmental  
Health, Los Angeles County  
Department of Public Health*

will have a significant impact on public health, with disproportionate impacts to the area’s most vulnerable populations, including children, elders, people with chronic diseases, outdoor workers, people living in poverty, and some communities of color.

## Positioning Public Health to Address Climate Change

Under the leadership of Dr. Jonathan Fielding, former Director of Public Health and Health Officer, the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) took steps to position itself

to address the serious public health challenges that climate change will bring. Seeking a strategic and organized approach, an intradepartmental workgroup was convened to provide input into the development of a department-wide plan. The resulting *Five-Point Plan to Reduce the Health Impacts of Climate Change* featured five strategic priority areas related to education, fostering climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies in the wider community, internal capacity building, and internal best practices to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The *Five-Point Plan* focuses on integrating climate change into current activities using existing resources in order to leverage the entire LACDPH workforce to undertake climate change work.



## Educating and Mobilizing the Workforce

A cornerstone of the *Five-Point Plan* is building the capacity of the public health workforce to tackle climate change. To address professional development needs for staff, the department partnered with University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Fielding School of Public Health.

Through this partnership, the department leveraged UCLA's public health and climate change expertise to create a series of scientifically rigorous, yet accessible curriculum for climate and health workshops.

### **Workshop 1 - Brainstorming Adaptation and Mitigation Strategies**

Approach:

- Brainstorm actions that could be used to either mitigate climate change or provide resiliency to the health impacts of climate change.
- Categorize the activities according to whether they would be performed at the individual, local, state, national or international level.

Beyond raising awareness, the sessions were designed to encourage staff to contribute to the department's climate action plan, and engage in future collaboration to integrate climate change considerations across the department's programs and services.

### **Workshop Design**

The 16-session Climate & Health Workshop Series was focused on promoting staff engagement with the material. Workshops featured a 20-25 minute lecture on a specific topic area taught by UCLA faculty or doctoral students, followed by an interactive 45-minute brainstorming session, during which staff broke into

groups to grapple with the issues presented in the lecture. These breakout groups engaged staff to talk through and develop creative yet feasible strategies that could be used in climate action planning documents. The group discussions also allowed staff to envision how a climate and health perspective could be incorporated into their own work.

For example, staff reviewed the county's heat response plan during a brainstorming session and identified complementary strategies to integrate climate change into the current plan.

### **Core Topics: Workshops 1-6**

- Introduction to how climate change is projected to impact health globally and locally
- Identifying populations that are vulnerable to climate change
- How to apply adaptive management in the context of climate action planning
- Ten things every public health professional should know about climate change
- How to communicate climate change related risks to critical stakeholders
- What experts predict the climate will be like in Los Angeles County in 2050 and 2100

### **Workshop 1 Learning Objectives**

- Pathways by which climate change impacts human health
- Ways individuals can mitigate the impacts of climate change
- Ways local agencies can help build resiliency towards climate change

The brainstorming sessions also provided the opportunity for using power versus interest mapping to identify potential stakeholders for specific issues.

There were six introductory core topics in the first series of workshops that provided an overview of climate change and its relevance to the South Coast Region and public health. With this baseline level of knowledge established, workshops then delved into specific topic areas such as air quality, water security, and vector-borne diseases. Employees from Veterinary

Public Health, Environmental Health, and Public Health Nursing attended the inaugural series.

<b>Five-Point Plan</b>	
INFORM	Inform and engage the general public about the nature of climate change and the health co-benefits associated with taking action to reduce carbon emissions.
PROMOTE	Promote local planning, land use, transportation, water, and energy policies that reduce carbon emissions and support the design of healthy and sustainable communities.
PROVIDE	Provide guidance on climate preparedness to local government and community partners to reduce health risks and create more resilient communities.
BUILD	Build the capacity of Departmental staff and programs to monitor health impacts, integrate climate preparedness, and improve climate response.
ADOPT	Adopt best management practices to reduce carbon emissions associated with Departmental facilities and internal operations.

To incentivize staff to attend workshops, nurses received continuing education credits, and division directors supported staff to prioritize the time needed for their participation.

### **Moving Forward**

Evaluation forms completed by participants indicated that staff knowledge in key areas increased following workshops. For instance, staff reported that they were better able to explain climate change and describe the role of LACDPH in mitigation and adaptation. They reported that they were also able to describe vulnerable populations most impacted by climate change in Los Angeles County, and they felt they could implement climate change knowledge into their work and/or daily activities.

The considerable interest in the workshop series led to requests that the workshops be open to all staff. Consequently, in September of 2014, the department re-launched the workshop series, now open to all LACDPH staff. To allow for the sustainability of the series, lectures by UCLA faculty and doctoral students were recorded for use in the series re-launch. Brainstorming sessions led by LACDPH staff complemented the lectures. To facilitate staff attendance across the many department facilities spread across Los Angeles County's 4,300 square miles, the workshops were being held in four different locations.

In August 2014, LACDPH released two reports in its Climate and Health series that are a call to action by individuals and families, and by the public health field and its partners. The first report, *Your Health and Climate Change in Los Angeles County*, presents information about what increasing temperatures, extreme weather, and rising sea levels mean for individual and family health — and what people can do to lessen these impacts.

The second report, *Framework for Addressing Climate Change in Los Angeles County*, was developed for use by other local government agencies in Los Angeles County as well as for other local health departments and their collaborating agencies around the country. It begins by outlining how climate change relates to the mission of different local agencies, and continues with guidance on how to develop an agency plan for addressing climate change. It is intended for agencies that are preparing to develop their own climate action plan and features the *Five-Point Plan* adopted by LACDPH, with examples of adaption and mitigation strategies for multiple government sectors.

## Lessons Learned

- Interactive staff education can increase staff awareness and feelings of professional agency regarding climate change.
- Local-level climate projections are crucial to climate change education. Local data and information are easier to accept and create the desire for local action. Global examples and data are hard to personalize.
- When collaborating, ensure the partnership is reciprocal. UCLA was amenable to designing a curriculum that was desired by the health department, which benefited both parties and created a strong learning collaboration.
- Workshops that were geared towards specific impact areas ensured that staff would find at least one workshop that spoke to their specific area of professional interest. Climate science presented to public health staff has to be accessible and relevant to their work.
- Brainstorming sessions were critical to allowing staff to engage with the material and prevent feelings of fatalism by providing a venue for discussing solutions.

## Resources

Climate Change and Public Health in Los Angeles  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/eh/climatechange/>

Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Unit  
<http://www.lapublichealth.org/eh/AreasofInterest/emergunit.htm>

Climate and Health Series - Report 1: Your Health and Climate Change in Los Angeles County  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/docs/climatechange1.pdf>

Climate and Health Series - Report 2: Framework for Addressing Climate Change in Los Angeles County  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/docs/climatechange2.pdf>

10 Things You Can Do to Reduce Climate Change (English & Spanish)  
<http://publichealth.lacounty.gov/hea/library/topics/climatechange/>

Los Angeles Regional Collaborative for Climate Action and Sustainability  
<http://www.laregionalcollaborative.com>

CalBRACE Project - California Department of Public Health, Office of Health Equity  
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/Programs/OHE/Pages/CalBRACE.aspx>

Climate and Health Initiative - Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
<http://www.cdc.gov/climateandhealth/brace.htm>

Photograph: Climate and Health Series - Report 1: Your Health and Climate Change in Los Angeles County, 2014. Courtesy of Los Angeles Public Health Department used with permission.

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