COMMUNITY HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT

Assessing Impact and Improving Resilience

Aligning Hospitals' Environmental Strategies to Advance Health

WORKSHOP 2 SNAPSHOT







About

The American Hospital Association's Community Health and Environment initiative offers insights and resources to support hospitals and health systems and their strategic partners in addressing the health impacts of environmental conditions on their communities and patient populations. The American Hospital Association, in partnership with the California Hospital Association and the Hospital Association of Southern California, hosted a workshop in Glendale, Calif., with 30 hospital emergency management leaders, as part of this initiative.

Workshop participants engaged in activities to identify key health outcomes influenced by the environment, prioritize challenges, develop pragmatic ideas and discuss how to include activities to improve health outcomes as part of community health assessments (CHAs) and community health implementation plans (CHIPs). This snapshot captures practical strategies and collaborative approaches discussed during the workshop.

Insights and strategies from the first workshop, which convened in Chicago in September 2024, are outlined in the "Exploring Population Health and Community Health Strategies" snapshot.

Key Themes

During this Community Health and Environment workshop, six key themes emerged, offering a foundation for actions to complement existing community and population health work by hospitals and health systems:

- Aligning environmental resilience across hospital operations.
- Using environment-related health data to enhance emergency preparedness.
- Standardizing metrics for long-term environmental resilience.
- Enhancing workforce well-being to sustain health care resilience.
- Deepening collaborative relationships with community partners.
- Aligning community health goals through incentives and frameworks.



Aligning Environmental Resilience Across Hospital Operations

Actions that improve the health of communities by fostering resilience to environmental conditions span a wide range of hospital operations — from facilities management and supply chain management to community health assessments and emergency

preparedness. By integrating these efforts across teams and departments and recognizing them as essential, hospitals and health systems can amplify their impact and create more cohesive, communitywide benefits.

Collaborative convenings were highlighted during the workshop as a key strategy for fostering knowledgesharing, aligning actions and elevating best practices. Such forums provide opportunities to address shared challenges, break down operational silos and integrate environmental resilience into routine hospital workflows.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Conducting reviews of the focus areas of current and future committees, workgroups and other convenings can help hospitals understand how and where factors related to environment and health could be relevant points of discussion.
- Leading targeted health education campaigns focused on respiratory diseases, mental health issues and chronic health conditions has helped some hospitals raise awareness across their organization and in their communities about environment-health linkages.
- Providing targeted education and aligning environmental resilience with strategic objectives and
 operational goals like efficiency and quality care can help embed this work into hospital team
 members' daily roles.
- Using data to anticipate needs and facilitate access to essential pharmaceuticals and medical supplies during natural disasters and extreme weather events can help hospitals address supply chain vulnerabilities. This may include coordinating with pharmacies, ensuring transport of critical medications and supporting outreach efforts to connect patients with necessary resources.







By analyzing spikes in emergency department (ED) and respiratory admissions and tracking similar data during acute events like heat waves and wildfires, health care teams can identify community members who may be at risk. Doing so helps hospitals proactively address upstream factors exacerbated by environmental conditions and, in turn, improve population-level health outcomes.



During weather events, many community residents turn to EDs as points of respite and care. This increased demand can contribute

to ED overcrowding, ambulance offload delays and challenges in patient flow. To effectively manage patient surges, hospitals and health systems can integrate environmental hazard preparedness into their ED diversion plans. This includes coordinating with alternative care sites and conducting community outreach to connect residents with essential services before, during and after crises.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Working with community partners, such as fire departments, that maintain geographical data on patients who rely on electricity-dependent durable medical and assistive equipment, hospital teams and emergency responders can better identify and prioritize support for those individuals during power outages.
- Using data to demonstrate the links between environmental conditions and specific health impacts or higher ED usage, hospitals can assess the health and resource implications of different approaches, including preventive care and emergency services.



Standardizing Metrics for Long-Term Environmental Resilience

Workshop participants emphasized that aligning leading health indicators across hospitals and health systems enables better tracking of environmental impacts over time, informs targeted interventions and supports cohesive regional planning. This approach not only enhances data accuracy and comparability but also strengthens a hospital's ability to prioritize resources to best meet the needs of its community.

By using consistent, standardized metrics — such as adding environmental risk factors like heat exposure and air quality indices into CHAs — hospitals and health systems can assess and compare community health gaps related to environmental factors at the granular level.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Analyzing the costs of ED visits related to respiratory illnesses and assessing certain environmental metrics, such as air quality and ambient temperature, helps build a case for implementing preventive measures. Some hospitals are tracking ED visits during extreme weather events to understand the potential for interventions. For example, providing air purification devices can help lower health care costs and improve community health.
- Sharing data and accessible resources with community members can help hospitals highlight their efforts in assessing and addressing environmental factors.



Enhancing Workforce Well-Being to Sustain Health Care Resilience

A hospital's or health system's ability to respond effectively to the health impacts of environmental factors is dependent on the well-being of its workforce. Environmental-related stressors — such as increased patient volumes and rising mental health demands during prolonged, extreme weather events like wildfires and heat waves — create higher-pressure environments that can place additional strain on health care workers.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Collecting data on the needs of their workforce such as housing stability, child care access and financial strain — can improve hospital programs that enhance employee well-being and retention.
- Supporting health care workers by addressing challenges such as transportation access during crises helps ensure they can get to work safely and continue providing care.



Deepening Collaborative Relationships With Community Partners

Building strong, bidirectional partnerships with local organizations enables hospitals and health systems to co-design health strategies that reflect the needs of their communities when impacted by environmental conditions. Community groups have deep knowledge of local issues, which helps ensure that initiatives are both targeted and aligned with community perspectives. Hospitals and health systems can consider outsourcing some community health activities to community-based organizations, strengthening partnerships and ensuring shared, sustained engagement.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAYS

- Identifying and using trusted communication channels within each community enables hospitals and health systems to effectively share information in ways that resonate with local preferences.
- Sharing insights and findings with their communities is one way hospitals and health systems can give back to participants and ensure meaningful and transparent information exchange.
- Achieving broader and deeper engagement with communities can be accomplished by recognizing the value and expertise provided by community-based organizations and appropriately compensating them for their contributions.





Aligning Community Health Goals Through Incentives and Frameworks

Hospitals and health systems can improve community and population health resilience to environmental conditions by incorporating targeted incentives and accountability measures. Tracking outcomes — such as reductions in ED visits related to environmental factors or hospital-led efforts to maintain community air quality — encourages teams to consider environmental conditions in daily operations. This approach not only improves resilience but also facilitates documenting return on investment by providing data that links preventive actions to cost savings and improved patient outcomes.

TACTICAL TAKEAWAY

• Using patient screening frameworks that consider environmental factors helps identify health needs related to those factors, such as heat sensitivity or respiratory issues exacerbated by wildfires or other extreme weather events.

EXAMPLE

Workshop-Generated Resilient Workforce Tactic

The following concept emerged from a short brainstorming session focused on addressing community health challenges and the environment.

The Problem

Wildfire events in California have led to significant community health challenges, including:

- **Surge in ED visits.** During wildfire events, there is an increase in respiratory-related admissions, some of which may be reduced through preventive action.
- **Overwhelmed emergency management systems.** The intensity and frequency of wildfires strain emergency response capabilities. These events often require extensive coordination, resource allocation and interagency collaboration to effectively manage the crisis.
- Workforce reduction. Health complications from smoke exposure and mandatory evacuations during wildfires can affect health care workers and lead to a decreased workforce during critical times.

Community Health Intervention

Implement a comprehensive set of preventive measures to mitigate health impacts during wildfire events:

- **Residential indoor air quality management.** Understand and identify patients who are most at risk of poor respiratory health outcomes due to increased smoke exposure or limited resources. Then provide air purification devices to at-risk patients and community members.
- **Proactive coordination.** Develop standardized, data-driven workflows to coordinate air quality responses for populations with limited resources or at risk due to increased smoke exposure.
- **Educational outreach.** Provide educational programming highlighting the dangers of wildfire smoke, identify preventive measures that community members can take, including in schools and nursing homes, and equip providers with toolkits and training.



Community Health Impact

Results of successfully implementing these measures may include:

- Enhanced patient experience. Improved air quality contributes to better health outcomes and quality of life.
- Workforce stability. Better working conditions mean fewer staff absences and increased employee satisfaction.
- **Reduced patient risk.** Targeted support ensures high-risk groups receive necessary resources, benefiting the entire community.

Hospital and Health System Benefits

- **Cost savings.** Reduced ED visits and decreased hospital admissions help lower health care expenditures.
- **Operational efficiency.** Decreased admissions and shorter hospital stays free up resources for other health care needs.



Assumptions and Risks

- **Investment returns.** Preventive measures may not yield immediate financial returns, requiring a focus on long-term benefits.
- **Collaboration efficacy.** Strong partnerships with public health entities and community-based organizations are needed to successfully implement interventions.
- **Financial considerations.** Initial costs may be high, necessitating careful budgeting and potentially using external funding sources.

Example Initiatives

- UC Davis Health in Sacramento, Calif., has developed a comprehensive action plan to support patients with preexisting respiratory diseases during wildfire events. This approach involves identifying at-risk patients, assembling multidisciplinary care teams, developing tailored care pathways and establishing outcome measures for continuous improvement. The goal is to proactively address the needs of patients with complex health needs and people dealing with sustained hardship who are affected by wildfire smoke.
- Breathe California offers free indoor air quality assessments and, if necessary, provides air purifiers to low-income older adults with respiratory conditions such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. This initiative aims to improve indoor air quality and reduce health complications during periods of poor air quality, including wildfire events.
- The California Air Resources Board's "Smoke Ready California" campaign educates the public on reducing smoke exposure during wildfires. The initiative provides guidelines on staying indoors, using air purification devices and wearing N95 masks to protect against harmful air pollutants. These measures aim to decrease respiratory-related hospital admissions by promoting preventive actions.



Top Takeaways for Leadership

- Explore opportunities to align efforts to improve health outcomes across hospital operations. Convening hospital and health system leaders and stakeholders regularly encourages sharing practices and identifying ways to embed environmental resilience into operations — such as facilities management, CHAs, supply chain management and patient care protocols — thus ensuring a more integrated approach.
- Strengthen hospitals' community anchor strategies. By prioritizing partnerships with a variety of local vendors, hospitals and health systems can reinforce regional supply chains while supporting community economic stability. Community health professionals can play a role in identifying gaps in local access to essential pharmaceuticals and medical supplies, advocating for shared distribution and collaborating with suppliers to meet community health needs. Expanding these existing efforts can further reduce gaps and improve responsiveness during extreme environmental events.
- Leverage health data to enhance preparedness. Analyzing trends, such as spikes in ED usage during extreme weather events, provides valuable insights for supporting community-based actions, strengthening emergency preparedness and showcasing the benefits of resilience investments. Integrating patient data with hospital operations, environmental metrics and identified community health and social needs can further identify trends and gaps, leading to a more comprehensive response to environmental impacts.

For more information on AHA's Community Health and Environment initiative, visit

www.aha.org/community-health-environment.

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