



Case study: Municipal Public Health Planning in Victoria

Pollution has long been identified as an obvious link between health and the environment. However, new Australian studies and activities in keeping with Local Agenda 21 suggest a far subtler link tying our well being to more than just green spaces.

Health outcomes vary across Victoria

Victoria, in Australia's southeast, has 4.7 million people, or one quarter of the nation's population. Victoria is a multicultural society, with one in four Victorians born overseas.

The Victorian Burden of Disease study shows that although the overall health of Victorians has improved over the past 20 years, it varies according to where people live. Concentrating on individuals and their access to health services, education, income and employment is important but is not the whole answer. Recognition that location influences health may help to redirect attention to environmental interventions, such as providing green spaces for healthy recreation, a pleasant and safe urban environment, improved public transport and better housing stock

Role of local government

The Victorian Government recognises the role organised public health efforts play in ensuring optimal health and wellbeing for all citizens. Victoria's 78 local governments have a unique capacity to make a difference because they operate in the communities they serve. The *Environments for Health* municipal public health planning framework helps local governments create a healthier community, whether the topic is health promotion, urban planning, service development or building community capacity.

This approach is consistent with the State Health Act's legislative planning requirements. This legislation, unique to Victoria, specifies that every three years local governments must prepare a municipal public health plan that assesses actual and potential public health risks as well as focusing on enabling the achievement of maximum well-being. It reflects the pro-active approach to public health promoted by the World Health Organisation in the Ottawa Charter and Local Agenda 21, a major outcome of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit.

Municipal Public Health Plans

The introduction and subsequent 10 years of development of Municipal Public Health Plans in Victoria emphasises a local strategic planning approach, determined by local public health needs and priorities and directed at achieving local public health outcomes.

Research in 2000 showed that most local governments had such health plans in place, but that a new planning framework was needed to support greater planning consistency amongst councils. Secondly, there was a realisation that the health plans needed to be informed by an ecological, holistic consideration of the impact on health and wellbeing of factors originating across and between the built, natural, social and economic environments.



New Planning Framework

Environments for Health was developed through extensive consultation and a partnership between the Public Health Group of the State Department of Human Services, peak local government organisations, individual local governments and other stakeholders. The framework provides a practical guide to scanning for issues, researching, identifying action and setting priorities.

Public health is promoted as an important focus for local government, involving governance functions such as strategic planning, advocacy, service coordination, and promoting community participation. Public health plans should be integral to local government comprehensive strategic planning. Public health plans should inform other planning processes effectively and prevent duplication and fragmentation of local planning efforts.

To implement the program, the government is supporting local governments to generate examples and stories to illustrate how *Environments for Health* operates in practice and workforce and skills development for local government staff in metropolitan and rural councils.

Good Practice Program

Sixteen projects covering 26 municipalities have received funding in 2002 to implement a wide range of initiatives that seek to:

- foster community involvement and ownership of health plans
- emphasise integrated planning processes and
- demonstrate the value of such approaches in addressing specific environmental dimensions and priority health issues.

Built environment forums

The Local Government Partnerships Team of the Department of Human Services has developed a partnership with the Planning Institute of Australia and the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, to promote understanding and action on the relationship between the built environment and health and well-being. We are working to improve collaboration between council urban planners, architects, engineers, environmental officers, corporate planners, health planners and social planners. A series of workshops on this topic is being held throughout Victoria in 2002.

More information

Victorian Department of Human Services – www.dhs.vic.gov.au/phd/localgov/