

Building Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Capacity: A Strategy for Congress and Government Agencies

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Executive Summary

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a combination of methods to systematically examine the potential health effects of proposed policies, programs, and projects. HIA provides decision-makers and stakeholders with information on potential health benefits and harms, disparities in the distribution of impacts, and alternatives for improving the ratio of benefit to harm. As a result, HIA enables more informed policymaking and implementation, with the aim of improving population health, equity, and sustainability. It is particularly useful for highlighting the health impacts of proposed policies outside the health sector, where potential health impacts may be under-recognized or poorly understood.

Despite the advantages of HIA, it has been slow to take hold in this country. In recent years, however, there has been increased interest in utilizing HIA, especially for local planning projects. But HIA has great potential to be used on a national scale, especially because of its potential to alert policymakers to the health implications of endeavors typically viewed as outside the range of health, such as transportation, agriculture and economic policies. For this reason, as a starting point, HIAs can be incorporated into Environmental Impact Assessments. But it is important to note that only using HIAs in this way would be under-utilization of a powerful tool

To encourage greater use of HIAs in policymaking, the authors recommend that Congress take the following steps:

1. Establish a national, quasi-governmental National Center for HIA;
2. Promulgate legislation to clarify and enable the consideration of impacts on human health within existing National Environmental Policy Act mandates;
3. Provide funds for interagency (e.g., NIEHS+USDA+Commerce) research grants to build state and local capacity to conduct and utilize HIAs; and
4. Establish a task force, which includes the GAO, CRS and the National Center for HIA, to assess opportunities, value, and mechanisms for HIA in federal government.

By implementing these steps, policymakers will go a long way toward providing the nation with a much-needed way to guide decision-making about health-related issues. While HIA cannot take the place of sound, deliberative decision-making, it can serve as a valuable asset for providing decision-makers with more complete information on possible courses of action and their potential consequences for the health and well-being of the public and future generations.

Note: The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors. They do not necessarily represent the views of Partnership for Prevention.

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