



**Second place winner in Category B
of the
Association of State and Territorial Health Officials’
2005 Vision Awards**

The Florida Department of Health’s Division of Environmental Health has a robust business plan and program evaluation process in partnership with its 67 county health departments, which are hybrid state/local partnership agencies. The evaluation process reviews statutorily-mandated county health department (CHD) core programs, which form the backbone of the department’s environmental health efforts. Through a process of continuous improvement and evaluation, we asked ourselves several questions: If we got all of our environmental health programs “right” or “complete”, could we declare the state environmentally healthy? Could we declare it at the county level? Are we too focused programmatically in Florida? This led to the hypothesis that perhaps the EH programmatic and funding structure of both state and local agencies may miss the "bigger picture" of the environmental health of the community.

This is an especially important issue in Florida which is experiencing continued, unprecedented growth, adding the pressure of 750 people every day to its schools, highways, water supplies, and open space. As communities become increasingly aware of the myriad links between environmental quality and human health, the need to address environmental health issues as perceived by the community will intensify. Further, pockets of existing communities will continue to risk being forgotten or receive a disparate level of services as new communities are developed.

Environmental Health Professionals can attempt to address some of these issues, yet environmental health has been a historically under-funded area with services that are primarily “out of sight”. The Division of Environmental Health proposed partnering with CHDs to implement a well-developed and executed community environmental health assessment process to complement a regimen of core programs. This will provide communities a process for relating and understanding environmental health concerns, a method to fill the “gaps” between programs, and a means for EH professionals to engage community partners in a leadership role.

The Florida Department of Health is the only state agency in the nation that has supported the PACE EH process in this manner. Over the last two years, pilot projects were started in 21 counties at various amounts up to \$30,000 each. We are currently working on starting our 22nd county pilot. Funding is derived from surplus budget when available. There is no dedicated funding source.

Results from the pilot projects show a strong need to closely examine the way we develop and service our communities. The process has addressed community needs not captured through programmatic and funding structures of state and local EH agencies. Support needs to be in place for environmental health professionals to complement their programmatic schedules with community assessments, and to have a role in local land use planning decisions.



Justification

The Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE-EH) was deemed the best tool to use to accomplish these areas of interest. This community-based process is a product of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) and aligned with Healthy People 2010 initiatives. The Florida Department of Health has a long history with this process, dating back to membership on the project's steering committee in the mid-1990s. The methodology is specific to environmental health: <http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/CEHA.cfm> Further, state office staff felt the following objectives could be addressed using the methodology and tasks listed in the PACE EH tool:

- ◆ Understand the relationship between the built environmental and environmental health,
- ◆ View environmental health more holistically than programmatically,
- ◆ Build trust between the CHD and the community, which will improve the effectiveness of existing programs and other public health efforts,
- ◆ Rely less on media outlets to establish the relationship between government and the public,
- ◆ Address outstanding environmental health issues not captured at the program level,
- ◆ Further integrate environmental health (prevention programs) with the clinical programs of the CHD,
- ◆ Allow communities to express and define their environmental health issues themselves,
- ◆ Establish relationships with local land use planners and public officials, and
- ◆ Empower a community to action beyond the life of the project.

In order to implement the PACE EH process in Florida and address the most common reasons given for not being able to support PACE (a lack of funds, time, and/or personnel), the Division of Environmental Health offered a number of small grants to institute pilot PACE EH projects. A short application process was created and CHD EH programs were invited to submit proposals as part of a voluntary process designed to fund innovative projects which incorporate PACE-EH principles of community collaboration and strategic assessment and planning. The state office supported the efforts with an initial orientation meeting between the CHDs and NACCHO officials, then through a website and monthly conference calls where project participants could share ideas and findings. Local EH personnel complemented the financial resource by being involved in the PACE EH process, in some cases including the EH Director and the CHD administrator.

Assessing the pilot project in its entirety, it has been successful. Many of the issues identified through the pilots do not fall within the traditional definition of "environmental health", but nonetheless they all affect the health of the community. Issues identified by communities as their environmental health issues include: no sidewalks, no street lights, not safe, uncared for property, drinking water problems, forgotten by local leaders, cut off from other neighborhoods, sewage problems, noise, and air pollution.

Results have included visible, physical improvements to the community. In the West Wabasso Community of Indian River County, the level of trust gained with the community is extraordinary. Tangible results from the PACE EH project include:

- ◆ Installation of streetlights has been completed.
- ◆ Ninety-five percent of required easements for a potable water project have been secured.
- ◆ A sidewalk project has been developed.
- ◆ Two park pavilion projects have been developed. The county has awarded the bid and construction is underway.
- ◆ Project Hope, dedicated to rebuilding homes in Wabasso, has been instituted. Currently, six homes have been demolished and Project Hope has committed to rebuilding at least three of them.
- ◆ Trust between the community and the county health department has been restored – rather than viewing the county health department as ignoring the community (the first community meeting consisted of residents shouting complaints at officials).

In the West Ocala community of Marion County, the PACE EH project has helped to gain renewed interest in an underserved community. The first Environmental Health day ever in this county was held in this community. In the Combee Community of Polk County, the PACE project reinvigorated homeowners who met with county commissioners and state senators to address neighborhood needs such as sidewalks and lighting for children to get safely to and from school. Polk County Environmental Health professionals are now working with their second neighborhood in the Wahneta community. The Gadsden County PACE EH leaders have developed a model nuisance animal ordinance to address citizens concerns for their safety. Environmental Health leaders in Hillsborough County partnered with the Weed and Seed program in the Palm River Community.

Project results from across the funded counties show a strong need to closely examine the way we build, develop, and service our communities and the associated impacts on our public health. The PACE EH process has been successful in elevating several of these communities to local leaders and demonstrating how a consistent process and expectation needs to be in place for public health and environmental health to have a role in local land use planning decisions. Community assessment processes, like MAPP or PACE EH, are now required in CHD administrator's job descriptions. At the state level, the Florida Department of Health has drafted a Memorandum of Agreement with two other state agencies on growth management issues. Effort was also made to incorporate the Department of Health in future growth management and land use planning processes.

The Florida Department of Health, Division of Environmental Health believes that replication of the PACE EH project is possible in any community in the United States. In reviewing the pilot projects and results, there are several limitations and obstacles to address in supporting a viable project:



- ◆ Due to existing EH and public health program expectations, there will be some reluctance to starting a process that will take time and will cause more work, and, in some cases, dig up more problems.
- ◆ Many professionals are taught a programmatic mind frame. PACE EH is predicated on letting the community identify their issues. These issues may not be able to be addressed programmatically and will depend upon professionals to work together across programmatic “boundaries”.
- ◆ Active support and involvement from the County Health Department Administrator and the Environmental Health Director are essential ingredients of success.
- ◆ The PACE EH project is premised upon face-to-face meetings with the community. This is difficult but essential work to the success of the project.
- ◆ The skill of the community coordinator or educator is essential to a successful project.
- ◆ Look for “low hanging fruit”. Work should be done to address an immediate problem identified by the community. This will promote trust and buy-in to the process.
- ◆ Stick with the community. Once a process is started, establishing trust will be dependent upon public health and EH professionals commitment through its entirety.

Complete project summaries are publicly available at the Florida Department of Health PACE EH Website: <http://www.myfloridaeh.com/programs/PACE-EH/PACE-EH.htm>

