



TOWARD HEALTH EQUITY: PRACTICAL ACTIONS FOR PUBLIC HEALTH INSPECTORS

Framework for action on the social determinants of health and health equity



Whether inspecting a food premises, responding to an indoor air quality complaint, promoting actions to reduce exposures to climate change health risks, or advocating for healthy built environment policies, public health inspectors (PHIs) and environmental health officers (EHOs) have a role to play to address the social determinants of health (SDH) and contribute to health equity.

Use the Framework to think about how health equity and the social determinants of health relate to your practice. It is not expected that any individual will be able to address all these points—they are intended to stimulate ideas and conversations about health equity and the social determinants of health. You may wish to read it through quickly and revisit it later, or work through individual points in detail. This framework can be used by staff with any level of knowledge or experience related to health equity.

1 Learn more about health equity and the social determinants of health

Review the NCCDH [Glossary of Essential Health Terms](#)¹ for definitions of key terms.

Review the BCCDC [Primer on Equity in Equity and Environmental Health Practice](#).²

2 Reflect on your practice to identify where equity and the social determinants of health impact—or are impacted by—your work

Ask yourself some questions to guide your thinking about how the SDH might influence an operator's or client's ability to reach compliance or make the changes being asked of them.

- Could any of the following factors have an effect on your relationship with the operator/client, or on their understanding of what needs to be done: culture, education, finances, geographic location (urban, rural, isolated community), language, literacy?
- What barriers (e.g., employment conditions, housing conditions, individual/family stress, personal or business income, personal health, transportation issues) might operators or clients be facing that would impact their ability or willingness to comply with regulations and guidelines?

How might your interactions with clients unintentionally aggravate existing barriers?

How might your interactions with clients help alleviate the effects of existing barriers?

How flexible are you when alternative ways of reaching compliance might be appropriate or achievable in a particular situation (e.g., finding alternatives to a standard hand washing setup, and options for sanitizing dishes with only two sinks)?

3 Identify how you can enhance your understanding of health equity

Find out who the key contacts are and how they can support your work.

- Who can you talk to you to for information, resources, etc.?
- Is there a lead or “point person” for SDH/health equity work in your agency?
- Are there cross-program opportunities to link with employees from outside your department who could support your understanding of health equity?

What professional development opportunities are available to you to learn more about SDH and health equity?

4 Identify barriers that prevent you from taking action

Identify situations in which you feel frustrated or “stuck” in terms of responding in a manner that you feel is helpful (e.g., you respond to a housing complaint and find a single mother living in unhealthy housing, but there are no clear violations on which you can require the landlord to take action).

- What prevents you from responding in the way you would prefer (i.e., lack of authority, information, resources, support, understanding of which agencies or people can help, etc.)?
- How would you prefer to see these situations play out? What can you do to facilitate this result?

5 Determine what you can do in the short, medium, and long term to take action toward health equity as an EHO or PHI

Start with actions that can be taken quickly and easily, where you already have contacts, or with something that is clearly within your current role.

- What are the ways that you might apply an “equity lens” in your day-to-day work?
- What can you change in your own thinking or approach?
- Has your manager or agency expressed interest in these issues? How can you leverage that?
- What resources and information exist elsewhere that you can access?
- Where can you suggest alternative approaches for working with operators or clients who face barriers?
- How can you advocate for people who need services to support their health and achieve compliance?
- What individuals and agencies can you contact within your current referral network?

6 Engage your environmental health colleagues

Find out what is being done by PHIs or EHOs in your region or in other regions/provinces.

- Can you use these approaches in your own practice?
- Can you share ideas, contacts, and experiences of your own or others with colleagues or supervisors to encourage similar action in your region?

7 Reflect on how health equity fits into the structure of your workplace

Consider how those you work with can support your work on health equity.

- What is needed from your direct supervisor or manager? From public health leadership? From government?
- What opportunities exist to integrate health equity considerations into organizational mandates, health status reports, and department or program work plans?

8 Consider collaborations outside your own department

Recognize issues that may be addressed by other professions. Introduce yourself, ask questions, and let them know what you do.

- What other professions within or outside public health (e.g., building inspectors, dietitians, epidemiologists, health educators, licensing officers, nurses, social housing providers, social workers, etc.) might have a valuable perspective on the issues faced by your clients? Can you use some of their approaches in your own practice?
- How can agencies or divisions outside health protection or environmental health (e.g., emergency response, population health, local government, social services) contribute?

9 Consider how other organizations can support health equity capacity for you and your colleagues

Think about increasing the knowledge and skills of PHIs and EHOs.

- What can degree-granting institutions (e.g., PHI training programs) do?
- How can your agency provide student placement opportunities that explore social determinants of health, health equity, and cross-discipline collaboration?
- What might the Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors (CIPHI), the Canadian Public Health Association, or your provincial public health organization do?
- What can environmental health or environmental justice organizations do?

10 Self-check

Set some personal goals with a reasonable timeline.

- Read our [Pilot Study Report](#),³ the [Primer on Equity and Environmental Public Health](#),² and the [Glossary of Health Equity Terms](#).¹
- Build one small action into your practice.
- Attend a webinar on health equity.
- Share an idea with your manager or director.

Create a calendar or email reminder to revisit your goals in 3, 6, or 12 months.

Join [Health Equity Clicks](#). This is an online community where members can engage with other public health practitioners on how they address the social determinants of health and health equity in their practice. Join it by visiting the NCCDH website at <http://nccdh.ca/connect/community-new>.

References

1. National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2014). *Glossary of essential health equity terms*. Antigonish, NS: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, St. Francis Xavier University. Available: <http://nccdh.ca/resources/glossary/>.
2. Rideout, K. (2016). *Primer on equity and environmental public health practice*. Vancouver, BC: BC Centre for Disease Control. Available: www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/professional-resources/health-equity-environmental-health/equity-and-eph-handbook.
3. Rideout, K. and National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (2015). *Equity in environmental health practice: Findings of a pilot study*. Vancouver, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health; Antigonish, NS: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, St. Francis Xavier University. Available: www.ncceh.ca/documents/evidence-review/equity-environmental-health-practice-findings-pilot-study.

**Are you working on these issues in your own practice or in your region?
Share your stories so that we can learn from you and pass it on to others.
Let us know what BCCDC, NCCEH & NCCDH can do to help.**

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La version française est également disponible aux adresses www.ccnds.ca et www.ccns.ca sous le titre *Vers l'équité en santé : mesures concrètes pour les inspecteurs en santé publique – Cadre d'action en matière de déterminants sociaux de la santé et d'équité en santé*.