

Case Study (from Why Place Matters Publication by PolicyLink and The California Endowment, p.26)

Health Impact Assessment in San Francisco: A Tool to Build Healthier Communities

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is an approach to examining the effects that land use and development decisions could have on health in a particular geographic area. The methodology has been applied in England, Australia, Canada, and several other countries, while in the United States, the most comprehensive work has taken place in San Francisco.

For 18 months, beginning in November 2004, the San Francisco Department of Public Health worked on the Eastern Neighborhoods Community Health Impact Assessment (ENCHIA) with stakeholders in a part of the city slated for intensive redevelopment. Out of this process came the Healthy Development Measurement Tool (HDMT)—a guide to the definition of issues, the collection of data, and the assessment of options. The HDMT provides the health rationales for considering each element of community conditions and moves through the established standards, key indicators, development targets, and strategic suggestions for policy and design. The eight elements include environmental stewardship, sustainable transportation, public safety, public infrastructure, access to goods and services, adequate and healthy housing, healthy economy, and citizen participation.

The process has proven useful to community-based organizations and has informed the debate over redevelopment policies in neighborhoods. Several groups that participated in ENCHIA, including the South of Market Community Action Network, are continuing to use the HIA framework as a basis for leadership development and assessing project proposals. This is an educational and a voluntary process, rather than a mandated review process such as an Environmental Impact Assessment, though there are some topics that overlap the two processes.

The San Francisco experience is being mirrored by a growing set of other HIA processes, many of them driven by community coalitions. In Richmond and West Oakland, local groups are using the HIA approach not only for analysis but also as an educational tool and a way to organize and increase the participation of residents of lower-income communities. In this context, the HIA becomes part of a broader effort to hold decision makers and developers accountable for the costs and benefits of development.