

California Healthy Places Act HPA 2007
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this groundbreaking legislation. My name is Rajiv Bhatia. I have practiced medicine and public health in San Francisco since 1992, and I am currently the Director of Occupational and Environmental Health for the City and County of San Francisco. I first practiced medicine in a public health clinic for the homeless just a block away from City Hall. I worked there for five years, and the first thing every homeless patient asked me for was a prescription for housing. I learned pretty quickly that a good deal of what I was treating as a doctor might be prevented by providing people with better housing.

Public health knows that our day to day living conditions—the social and physical environments—are the most important factors for keeping a society healthy.

Public health has been focusing on land use because more and more evidence tells us that how we plan our neighborhoods matter. Children who live near parks or go to a school in their neighborhood get more exercise; a nearby supermarket translates into a healthier diet; crowding in a home increases stress and infections; and living by freeway worsens asthma.

Put all the environmental factors affecting health together and living in neighborhoods without enough health resources can take a decade or more of life.

A critical and necessary strategy for a healthy California is planning our communities and neighborhoods with health in mind. This would also save a lot of money. In 2000, California spent approximately \$500 million on hospitalizations due to asthma alone. The estimated medical care costs of the consequences of obesity and overweight are \$21.7 billion.

Health Impact Assessment is a simple idea: that public decisions should be made with the best available evidence of their effects on health.

An incredible amount of evidence connects community design to health and HIA is a proven approach to translate that health evidence to the planning process. Many countries around the world have been using health impact assessment because it helps get health concerns on the agenda of people working on issues ranging from redevelopment to transportation, housing, and agriculture.

Assessing health effects when we do land use planning also fulfills California's promise to environmental justice by providing a way to analyze how our decisions affect the health of low income and minority populations.

In the USA, HIA is emerging in both rural and urban areas. The Centers for Disease Control, American Planning Association and the National County and City Health Officials have a joint training program for local health officials in HIA for land use planning. Congresswoman Hilda Solis authored a federal bill to support HIA at the Federal Level.

Now is the time for doing this work in California. California will be building new neighborhoods to house California's future residents and will spend billions on our transportation system. These investments should be made considering how they can support public health.

California also needs to make sure that new development doesn't create new environmental health problems. Unwise choices can expose more people to high levels of noise, poor air quality, and traffic hazards and limit not improve their access to schools and parks. Pro-actively addressing these environmental concerns will make it easier for cities both to grow and to implement smart growth.

Many community groups have been asking for health to be considered in planning. Residents living near Ports want mitigations for the impacts of trucking. Groups in Los Angeles have asked the City to consider how the revitalization of the Los Angeles River can best increase physical activity for residents lacking park resources.

Most planners understand well that planning healthy places is a shared task with public health. Our disciplines need new tools and resources to meaningfully respond to the health needs of the communities they serve.

California has always been a leader in environmental health. The 2007 California Healthy Places Act would help build the toolkit planners and public health professionals need to effectively evaluate land use plans. It would

create a mechanism to share evidence and best practices. It would create guidance to ensure a scientific, effective, and simple approach is followed. And it would create a mechanism make sure local community groups are involved in prioritizing health needs.

At the San Francisco Department of Public Health we have been evaluating land use and health issues raised by both community members and planners for a decade. In one of our first uses of health impact assessment, we analyzed a proposal to redevelop an apartment building as condominiums. That assessment provided evidence showing that the eviction of residents and the loss affordable housing would be harmful to the health of residents and the city. Both planners and community residents used the evidence to convince the developer to revise the plan to include replacement of all of the lost affordable units and a home for the existing residents in the new building.

In another example, a health assessment of a new downtown neighborhood provided support for a community impact fund. That fund will provide the city with resources for public parks, pedestrian safety, and community centers to benefit the health of residents of the neighborhood.

In San Francisco, we have moved away from looking at projects one by one and developed a more way to pro-actively look a new land use plans and project based on the community's comprehensive vision for health.

The interest in HIA is growing across the State in places as different as Oakland, Sonoma, Los Angeles, Shasta, and Merced. In a recent project in West Oakland, residents have used health impact assessment to work with a non-profit housing developer and improve the design of senior housing.

The City of Richmond California is currently using health impact assessment in an innovative way to build a health element for the cities general plan. Ultimately the health criteria in the plan will be used prospectively to evaluate projects.

Health Impact Assessment is a rapidly evolving field. Local agencies are in the best position to identify health and planning priorities but they need the State to create a vehicle for support and coordination, for research and training, and the sharing of best practices and lessons learned.

The California Healthy Places Act aims to do this. I strongly encourage you to support this bill.