



SOPHIA | *HIA & Equity Case Study*

Integrating Health and Equity into a Regional Housing Plan

In 2014, the Ingham County Health Department (ICHHD) worked with a coalition of other health and housing partners to conduct an HIA on the five-year affordable housing plan for the tri-county region Capital area of mid-Michigan. The plan, entitled *Innovative, Collaborative, Empowering Fair and Affordable Housing Initiatives: The Next Five Years for Ingham, Clinton and Eaton Counties* (or the ICE Housing Plan) is comprised of policy recommendations to improve housing quality and affordability, and compliance with fair housing laws. The HIA team worked with the lead organization, the Greater Lansing Housing Coalition, to integrate health considerations into the ICE Housing Plan. The HIA was focused on advancing equity.

The communities that could realize the greatest health benefits from implementation of the ICE Housing Plan were immigrants, refugees, seniors, rural residents, and the homeless. Currently, these groups lack quality and affordable housing, and sometimes experience cultural and linguistic barriers that affect their ability to address unhealthy housing concerns. Lead exposure and poor indoor air quality due to pests, mold, or bed bugs are common in the housing options most available to these communities. Higher housing costs may also prevent residents from spending their income on medications or healthy food.

A focus on equity was integrated throughout the HIA process

Throughout the HIA, the team conducted extensive stakeholder engagement. When they realized that the groups most impacted by the Housing Plan-- refugees, immigrants, seniors, rural residents, the homeless-- were not in attendance at the ICE focus groups, the HIA team organized an additional five focus groups, and administered a survey to over 500 residents. They partnered with local nonprofits like a senior center and a homelessness coalition to recruit participants, and provided interpreters (in seven languages) and incentives (coupons) to ensure robust and meaningful participation. The HIA team worked to identify “win-win” solutions that reflected the diverse interests of participants.

An HIA advisory group included representatives from a diverse range of organizations representing the impacted communities. The group informed the study and facilitated HIA meetings and interviews with the impacted communities; they also linked a university professor conducting a housing study with the impacted communities and provided feedback on the HIA recommendations before the plan was finalized.

The HIA was used to build community capacity

The HIA provided a new approach to advance equity on an issue that had not received adequate attention, despite the efforts of community advocates to elevate the case of refugee housing issues for over 20 years. Through the HIA process and findings, community members formed and strengthened partnerships and systematically compiled data that captured the lived experience of communities facing inequities, which gave new voice to long-standing challenges.

Community leaders and residents involved with the study reported that the HIA has had a lasting impact. Many residents felt their voice was heard for the first time. They also learned about their legal rights and say they are more likely to speak to their landlords to advocate for their rights without fear of eviction.

The HIA helped build power in the communities most impacted

Building community power and landlord accountability were notable outcomes of this project. The HIA team also had several successes within the health department and across local government. As a result of the HIA and similar initiatives, the local government hired an environmental justice coordinator with a legal background to educate communities on their legal rights, and promote HIA recommendations and monitor implementation, especially with regard to fair housing law. The implementation of recommendations related to housing quality improvement are currently underway in the City of Lansing. The proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2017 includes a full time housing ombudsman position and the city has recently filled three vacant positions that are intended to alleviate the workload of staff who check on code violations and track unregistered or delinquent properties.

The HIA team also took a strategic approach to their final recommendations – one that is uncommon in HIA practice. They focused on what the health department could do internally, and then they engaged external partners in elevating concerns and issues. This approach succeeded in building positive relationships that were foundational to future work together.

Among decision makers, the HIA process and findings elevated the potential health consequences of housing affordability and quality to state policy discussions. The HIA added context and provided data about state legislative funding proposals related to healthy housing.

The HIA helped achieve policy changes that reduce inequities

It is too early to know if this HIA contributed to any long-term impacts on health outcomes. However, housing quality and affordability are foundational to good health, and an approach like the ICE Housing Plan that targets inequities can ensure positive outcomes if implemented with that focus. Several health department staff members are currently monitoring the implementation process to ensure a focus on equity.

ICE Housing Plan HIA advanced equity by:

- ◆ Engaging impacted communities, especially immigrants, refugees, seniors, rural residents and the homeless, in the larger ICE Housing Plan process;
- ◆ Providing resources and support for residents to advocate for their legal rights;
- ◆ Creating internal positions at the health department that focus on equity and environmental justice;
- ◆ Building internal capacity for applying a health lens to housing projects, and building strong relationships with housing sector partners;
- ◆ Educating partner organizations on the social determinants of health; and
- ◆ Raising awareness about health and housing with local and state policymakers.

For more information, please contact Janine Sinno Janoudi at Ingham County Health Department (jsinno@ingham.org).

To read the full case studies and report, please visit the SOPHIA website:

<https://sophia.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/EquityMetricsWhitePaper.pdf>