

Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists Position Statement

04-ENV-01

Committee: Environmental

Title: Support for the Environmental Public Health Tracking Program

Statement of the Problem:

It is widely recognized that the environment influences human health and health outcomes. However, while clear relationships have been identified between environmental factors specific diseases, such as exposure to asbestos and lung cancer, the effects of most environmental exposures on the development of chronic diseases have yet to be examined. Chronic disease—which affects 90 million Americans and costs \$105 billion annually¹—can be prevented in part by improved monitoring and management of environmental factors. Yet public health professionals lack basic information as to how chronic diseases, such as asthma or cancer, are influenced by environment. This critical knowledge is needed to mitigate hazardous environmental exposures and reduce the public health burden of chronic diseases.

There is currently no comprehensive national surveillance system to investigate the possible links between environmental exposures and chronic diseases. Few systems exist at the state or national level to track environmental exposures and subsequent health effects and these systems are usually not compatible with each other; linking data to identify and examine environment-related diseases is extremely difficult. Moreover, most states lack adequate epidemiologic capacity required for collecting and distributing essential environmental and health data.² A cohesive national network with uniform standards for tracking chronic disease trends and environmental exposures is needed to ascertain the association between environmental hazards and disease and to identify populations at risk for developing environmental-related disease. In addition, information gathered through this network will help establish sound environmental policy and inform appropriate intervention and prevention strategies.³

In 2002, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was allocated funding to develop a nationwide environmental public health tracking network and build capacity in environmental health within state and local health departments. The goal of this program is “to create a tracking system that will integrate environmental hazards and exposure data with data about diseases that are possibly linked to the environment. This system is designed to allow federal, state, and local agencies, and others to:

- monitor and distribute information about environmental hazards and disease trends
- advance research on possible linkages between environmental hazards and disease
- develop, implement, and evaluate regulatory and public health actions to prevent or control environment-related diseases.”⁴

To date, 21 states and 3 cities have been funded through CDC’s *Environmental Public Health Tracking Program* to link environmental exposure and health effects data. Even in the program’s infancy, states have made progress in gaining knowledge needed to link environmental hazards and chronic disease. For example, states have implemented new data systems, improved existing surveillance systems, and engaged stakeholders critical to the tracking process. However, the success of this program will depend on the continued progress of these funded states and the participation of the remaining unfunded States. Currently, states are limited in their ability to implement or continue tracking programs without additional resources and the continued support from the federal government.

Statement of Position(s) to be Adopted:

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CSTE supports the annual appropriation of \$100 million for the CDC *Environmental Public Health Tracking Program*, which would assure that all states have needed environmental health capacity to link environmental exposures and health outcomes.

Public Health Impact:

The *Environmental Public Health Tracking Program* will help improve the health of communities when all states have the ability to continuously collect, interpret, and disseminate information about environmental exposures, hazards, and related health effects. Information gathered from this tracking will enable public health officials and healthcare providers to evaluate preventive strategies and implement interventions. In addition, the public will have a better understanding of environmental exposures in their communities and what actions they may take to protect or improve their health.

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References:

- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Chronic Disease Overview*. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/overview.htm> Updated April 6, 2004
- ² Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists. *National Assessment of Epidemiologic Capacity in Public Health: Findings and Recommendations*. 2002.
- ³ Pew Environmental Health Commission. *America's Environmental Health Gap: Why the Country Needs a Nationwide Health Tracking Network*. September 2002.
- ⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *CDC's Environmental Public Health Tracking Program – Background*. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/tracking/background.htm> Updated February 5, 2003.