

The Role of Human Services in Fighting for Environmental Justice

During the American Public Human Services Association's (APHSA) National Health and Human Services 2022 Summit, 20 state and local health and human services leaders and federal partners convened for a four-hour working session aimed at exploring the role of human services agencies in fighting for environmental justice (EJ). The session aimed to accomplish three objectives: (1) expose human services leaders to the intersection of human services and EJ, (2) identify potential actions human services agencies can take to engage in EJ, and (3) inform an action agenda to focus EJ efforts moving forward. Over the course of the session, attendees participated in a series of small-group and full-group discussions and activities to better understand what EJ is and how it shows up in our communities, how human services agencies are already engaging in EJ efforts, what challenges exist to engaging in EJ, and identifying strategies for advancing EJ work in the human services space. This summary aims to capture the key takeaways from the session and lay out potential next steps for advancing EJ work in human services.

Overall key takeaways

The section below outlines the key takeaways across all activities and all groups by summarizing the key questions, concepts, and themes that emerged. Through this session, two ideas became clear – (1) *the fight for environmental justice is just beginning* and (2) *the time to act is now*.

Identify, define, and carve-out a role for human services. Human services agencies are engaging with EJ to varying degrees and with varying levels of formality. Several attendees acknowledged that part of the challenge is in just getting a seat at the table. Often human services agencies are not viewed as relevant to the discussion around EJ, thus initial efforts have to focus on advocating for a seat at that table. These efforts should highlight why human services agencies have a critical role to play in supporting individuals, families, and communities in fighting for EJ. At the organizational level, this means looking for ways to prioritize EJ by possibly developing new roles dedicated to dealing with issues related to climate change, helping staff identify ways they can support EJ efforts through their existing work so that this does not become an added burden, and potentially realigning duties to minimize burden on staff. Attendees also pointed to the need for dedicated funding allocated for the explicit purpose of fighting for EJ.

Engage clients and the community in identifying and addressing environmental justice. An essential component of how human services agencies engage in EJ appears to be a person-centered approach. Many attendees put forward the idea of engaging clients and the broader community in identifying needs related to EJ and climate change, as well as partnering with them to identify relevant resources and develop solutions to address the impacts of EJ and climate change through service delivery. In taking this approach, attendees stressed the need for centering equity in pursuing EJ by engaging clients and community members as leaders in the transformation process.

Educate leaders, staff, clients and communities about environmental justice and climate change. Given that these efforts are still in the early stages, many attendees expressed interest in neutral language for talking about EJ within their organizations and communities, so that they can begin to educate leaders, staff, clients, legislators, and others. Messaging around what EJ is, why it is important to human services, and the role human services agencies can play in addressing EJ issues was of particular interest. Attendees were especially eager to better understand how to communicate with, educate, and train staff on matters of EJ; and explore how staff can be leaders in these efforts. One common challenge identified throughout the session was that EJ and climate change have both

become divisive and politically charged terms. This highlights the need for clear, non-divisive language for engaging different audiences in discussions about EJ.

Break down siloes in favor of collaboration and coordination. Breaking down silos and reaching across agencies and into communities to serve families is not new to human services agencies as cross programmatic efforts have been underway for decades. The same applies to EJ efforts. Environmental justice and climate change are cross-cutting challenges and, as with all human services programs, operating in siloes will prevent effective action from being taken. Attendees shared their efforts to break down silos in their organizations, however it was noted that there is still work to do. Breaking down siloes and promoting coordination and collaboration will allow these issues to be considered from a variety of perspectives and better positions systems to serve the whole individual and family. This cannot be done hastily, but rather requires an intentional approach to bringing together people of differing levels both within and across organizations.

For more information about the takeaways from each individual activity, please see pages 3-5.

Next steps

We are excited that the conversation on the intersection of HHS and EJ is underway, and we look forward to continuing efforts. We need your help!

- Please complete the [short online survey](#) by Friday, July 15.
- Keep the conversation going – connect to those you worked with during the session and others to continue the conversation around environmental justice. The attendee roster is included in the materials.
- Participate, or send a team member, to another design session in August during the [Economic Mobility & Well-Being Conference](#) in Savannah, GA, by reaching out to Chloe Green at cgreen@aphsa.org and expressing interest. This session will focus more specifically on the intersection of EJ and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

The sessions from the National Health and Human Services 2022 Summit and the Economic Mobility and Well-Being Conference will inform a broader plan for advancing EJ in Human Services.

Call to action

We encourage everyone to begin thinking about actions that you, as an individual, or your organization can take to advance EJ in your community – consider reviewing some of these resources to get started:

- [One-minute video](#) from HHS on new Office of Environmental Justice
- [“Climate Change and Health: A Call to Social Workers”](#) – *The National Association of Social Workers*
- [“Connecting Our Work to Environmental Justice”](#) – *President’s Memo in APHSA’s Policy & Practice Magazine*
- [Infographic](#) of “The Intersection of Environmental Justice and Human Services” – *Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE)*

Environmental Justice Workshop Summary

Whether you participated in the June session at the Summit and want to continue the discussion, want to join and become part of the discussion, or just learn more about the role of human services in fighting for EJ, **please reach out to Chloe Green (CGreen@aphsa.org) at APHSA.**

Takeaways from each activity

This section details the takeaways from each individual activity across the small groups.

What does environmental justice bring to mind for human services leaders?

In reflecting on their own experiences with EJ and identifying what questions and ideas were top of mind for them related to EJ at various levels (direct service, organizational, and systems/community), attendees coalesced around several key themes (Table 1).

Table 1. How human services leaders think about the intersection of EJ and human services

Level	Key takeaways and themes
Direct service and EJ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educate staff and clients about the impacts of climate change and environmental justice - Train staff on the resources and ways to support clients dealing with the impacts of climate change - Identify and make relevant resources available (e.g., transportation, weatherization, heating and cooling systems/centers, food) - Assess client needs related to climate change and tailor service delivery to meet those needs - Create an opt-out for virtual notices instead of an opt-in - Offer trainings and certifications for green jobs
Organization and EJ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Raise awareness about EJ within human services agencies - Work across departments within the organization to serve clients - Identify opportunities to engage in EJ when doing strategic planning and budgeting - Learn from American Indian and Alaska Native (AINA), and other indigenous practices - Assess the needs of employees with a lens toward adapting to the changing climate - Shift roles and responsibilities to address climate change and EJ more directly (e.g., disaster and crisis case managers) - Change mindsets and cultures to focus on challenges holistically - Ask for a seat at the table when environmental issues are being discussed
Community and EJ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the community resources available and educate the community - Improve outreach and communication to better inform those in the community - Lead with an explicit focus on addressing issues of equity - Set up local emergency funds for addressing natural disasters and other issues - Develop infrastructure for better public transportation - Develop cross-cutting partnerships to de-silo programming - Understanding the shifting labor market and economy nationally and locally - Engage the community in identifying needs and developing solutions - Create a community of practice

What does environmental justice look like in action within human services?

Attendees explored what their organizations might already be doing to engage in EJ efforts, what challenges hinder their ability to do so, and what opportunities may exist to further engage with EJ. The list below highlights the main efforts, challenges, and opportunities, identified across each group, to engage in EJ:

- Current efforts and future opportunities to engage in EJ

- Make work more accessible for staff (for example, teleworking)
 - Make services more equitable and accessible for clients
 - Engage American Indian and Alaska Native populations and programs in the discussion on EJ
 - Develop solutions that account for local context and consider the most vulnerable
 - Provide services that address issues related to EJ and climate change (for example, food access, mental health, disaster response)
 - Subsidize sustainable energy options, such as solar panels, and transportation options
 - Simplify and coordinate services across within and across agencies and departments
 - Develop partnerships to build more resilient communities
 - Advocate for a seat at the EJ table
 - Engage clients and the community in adapting and developing service offerings
 - Use data and evidence to inform decisions
 - Draw on existing efforts to integrate an EJ framework into what is being done
- Challenges to engaging in EJ
- Lack of awareness and understanding
 - Differing politics, ideologies, and cultural values
 - Potential implications on compliance and performance
 - Workloads and competing priorities
 - Lack of designated funding and resources
 - Siloes and lack of coordination
 - Human services agencies are not typically part of the discussion

What strategies can help advance environmental justice?

For the last activity of the day, attendees worked in their same small groups to develop a strategy for engaging in EJ based around the challenges and opportunities identified in the previous activity. Brief summaries of each strategy can be found below:

The Wellbeing Initiative

The Wellbeing Initiative is a proposed community-driven approach to identifying the true needs of individuals and the community at large, related to issues of environmental justice. This effort will focus on building trust actively engaging the community to lead efforts to identify issues related to environmental justice and develop relevant solutions. In this way, The Wellbeing Initiative hopes to build trust and generate transformation within the community by positioning community members as leaders and tackling systemic issues that lead to environmental injustice. address environmental justice issues.

Common Ground: How we talk about EJ

Common Ground focuses on developing neutral, non-charged, shared language related to environmental justice and climate change as the foundation for moving this work forward. Common Ground recognizes that these terms have become decisive and politically charged and as such this effort looks for ways to reframe and rebrand the discussion so that a larger audience can be reached to engage in efforts. This would include conducting research to understand what language and

values resonate the most with various audiences and then determining out how to normalize and socialize that language.

The “Why”

The “Why” aims to develop messaging and visuals that use neutral language to help human services staff and leaders connect the dots between human services and EJ. The “Why” hopes that developing messaging about why EJ is relevant for human services will provide a foundation for future EJ work by defining the motivation for engaging in EJ and lifting EJ up as a priority for human services. In making the connection clear, The “Why” will help staff and leaders understand how their existing work supports EJ efforts and begin to think about other opportunities to further EJ efforts.

Incorporating EJ into Our Values

Incorporating EJ into Our Values centers on building EJ into human services work as a foundational element, rather than as an add-on. With this approach organizations will define values related to EJ and integrate them into their service model. In doing this, Incorporating EJ into Our Values looks to enhance the lives of those served by addressing environmental injustices through their services. This will require obtaining staff and leadership buy-in, lifting up staff and positioning them as leaders, reducing and realigning staff duties, and developing outcomes that prioritize EJ.

What will help or hinder efforts to engage in environmental justice?

Attendees were also asked to identify what could hinder their strategy and what resources would help their strategy to succeed. There was a lot of similarity across the groups, regardless of the strategy. Attendees identified the following hindering and helping factors:

- Factors that may hinder each strategy:
 - o Different cultural contexts, ideologies, and political beliefs
 - o Staff and agency capacity and workload
 - o Lack of priority or too many competing priorities
 - o Lack of commitment at various levels within relevant organizations

- Factors that may help each strategy:
 - o Connections to experts and those with relevant experience
 - o An existing model or framework to follow or draw from
 - o Examples of neutral language
 - o Knowledge, information, and resources about EJ (including training)
 - o Staff retention