



Using Health Impact Assessment: How HIA Made Billings, Mont., a Community that is Healthy by Design

Hillary S. Harris
Yellowstone City–County Health Department
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INTRODUCTION

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) is a combination of procedures, methods and tools intended to provide a set of evidence-based recommendations that can be used to inform the planning of programs, projects and policies. HIA seeks to maximize the positive health impacts and minimize the negative impacts of these proposed policies, programs or projects. A successful HIA involves the community and uses the results of the study to present recommendations to decision-makers. This particular project used HIA as a tool to communicate with stakeholders and to advocate to decision-makers in Yellowstone County, Montana.

POLICY/PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

HIA is an emerging tool that is currently finding its place in planning processes. To date, less than 30 HIAs have been completed and published in the United States. The dialogue that has been created by the use of HIAs allows health experts and planners to collaboratively focus on creating places that promote healthy lifestyles and reduce chronic disease. Because of a lack of quantitative data resources, in most of the HIAs, judgments were based largely on practical experience. For example, no models exist to predict how many cases of depression will be prevented if green space is included in neighborhood design (Dannenberg, 2008).

Research findings from this project show that several factors need to be considered in conducting a grassroots effort to introduce HIA into a community.

- Create a concise method for relating information about HIA.
- Foster key partnerships and identify a champion among those partners.
- Understand that the concept of HIA is not likely to take off overnight.

The best-case scenario would be to see HIA become a regulatory part of all projects, policies and programs that take place within the community. However, what we can hope for at this point is to start small and see the concept of HIA become recognized.

KEY LESSONS

- ***Determine how to explain HIA in a succinct and easy-to-understand manner.***

HIA presents itself as a fairly abstract concept, often difficult to conceptualize and see as relevant. HIA practitioners need to discern the best possible method for presenting the theories in a logical manner for stakeholders. For example, in many cases comparing HIAs to an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) can help with conceptualization, but be cautioned that your audience may view EIAs negatively. We found a one-page HIA “fact sheet” was the simplest way to get the point across. There are numerous overviews now available through the National Association of County/City Health Officials and others. Additionally, be sure and present the concept of HIA initially as a tool that will provide a benefit to your audience. Find a way to entice your audience and help them understand that conducting an HIA has great potential for adding value to their cause. More specifically, if you are speaking to a group of economically minded individuals—realtors for example—focus on how HIA recommendations can have an impact on the economic development of a community. It is important that your audience understands how HIA can be tailored to meet project-specific needs. Until HIA presents itself as a sought-after tool, practitioners will likely need to market the notion of HIA to stakeholders. For this reason, practitioners will need a complete understanding of the full value an HIA has to offer and a succinct and easy strategy to convey this message.

- ***Key partnerships are a must, and a champion among those partners is essential.***

Find your champion among your partners; this can help you bypass hurdles. Start by identifying your partners, those who have a vested interest in improving the health of the community. Enhance your partners’ understanding of HIA by providing them the necessary materials to comprehend how and why the tool might be used. Look among your partners to seek out the champion or player who best understands the purpose of HIA and its place within your community. Begin dialogue to identify the most effective uses for HIA and select an appropriate conduit (program, policy or project) to begin cooperatively initiating the HIA process.

We had identified and worked with the City of Billings Planning Department, and this department had an obvious connection with the City of Billings Planning Board. Together, the planning department and the planning board were about to undergo the rigorous task of updating the City of Billings/Yellowstone County Growth Policy, a document intended to guide the growth patterns and economic development of the city and county over the next five years. In this instance, we found that the City of Billings Planning Department was our champion. The planning board was hesitant to allow our HIA team to conduct an assessment in coordination with the revision until

the board learned of the planning departments' unanimous support in favor of the assessment. The HIA likely would not have taken place without the original identification of the planning department staff as a key partner and champion for overcoming this barrier.

- ***Don't be afraid to tap into the resources that are available.***

HIA is a new tool in the public health field, and the resources are not so abundant. However, this also means that the people conducting HIAs are enthusiastic about their work and are passionate about expanding the use of HIA. Therefore, HIA practitioners have an opportunity to tap into great resources including people, organizations and learning materials. The more information used to conduct an HIA the more successful the results. Our HIA team was fortunate enough to connect with Aaron Wernham, M.D., an innovator in the development of HIA in the United States. We feel privileged to have made contact with him and to have received his guidance and recommendations for moving our HIA projects forward. Wernham was also gracious enough to travel to Billings in order to conduct a day-and-a-half training for several community members on the topic of HIA. His expertise in the area of HIA has proved invaluable to our community and many were able to gain knowledge because of his training. We recognize that the level of expertise that he brought to our community would have been out of reach were he not enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge. Other HIA practitioners could help spread the growth of HIA by emulating his enthusiasm for sharing his knowledge.

- ***There is no right or wrong way to do HIAs—make it work for your project.***

One of the intimidating things about HIA can be that there is no great step-by-step manual, which can make it difficult to start the process and often makes the practitioner feel off track. In addition, a practitioner's project, policy or program may not match any of the previous HIAs completed, and therefore a good example can be difficult to find. It is important to know that HIA is a flexible tool and that you need to make it match your project. HIAs can focus on the scope of the project, the health issues chosen to address and even the final format of the results. The two HIAs that were conducted in Yellowstone County took on very different formats. Our first project, the Health Impact Assessment on the Growth Policy led to a more formalized final report than did the Heights Aquatic Center Health Impact Assessment. Based mostly on project timing, several adjustments had to be made to create an appropriate use for HIA in both situations and the adjustments were necessary in order to provide quality reports for the stakeholders involved in the assessment.

RESULTS

- Incorporation of a Community Health section into the Yellowstone County and City of Billings 2008 Growth Policy Update

The City of Billings Planning Department presented local HIA practitioners an opportunity to become involved in the five-year update of the City of Billings/Yellowstone County Growth Policy. The purpose of the Growth Policy is to guide local officials and community members in making decisions about the community's growth, both development and redevelopment, that will affect the future of the community. Practitioners looked retrospectively at the 2003 Growth Policy. While recognizing many situations that contained underlying elements of health, the recommendation was given to incorporate a separate element specific to community health. With strong support for this recommendation, practitioners became involved in the community involvement aspect of the revision process and created 40 growth strategies focusing on the health of the community.

- ***Organization of a two-day Trailhead to Health Summit engaging community leaders and policy-makers***

A key component of a successful HIA is involving the community. To achieve the goal of community involvement in HIA, a summit was conducted (Trailhead to Health Summit) to assemble relevant community groups and influential leaders for cross-education and collaboration on community efforts, including HIA. The summit was focused on Yellowstone County and had numerous sessions on HIA (both the methodology and results from local HIAs) and also gave an introduction to the built environment and the link to health. There were more than 100 attendees with a wide variety of community organizations represented.

- ***Training of nontraditional partners on health impact assessment***

When promoting a grassroots effort in a community, it is important to provide community members with opportunities to learn about the subject matter at hand. A local HIA training prospect provided several community members with an opportunity to learn about and participate in portions of a tabletop HIA. The discussions during this training were noted and later used to add weight to a full HIA write-up on a local project—the Heights Aquatic Center. More than 30 community members attended the day-and-a-half training given by Aaron Wernham.

KEY PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

Brian Cole

University of California, Los Angeles, School of Public Health
(310) 206-4253
blcole@ucla.edu

Aaron Wernham

Project Director, Health Impact Project, Pew Health Group
Pew Charitable Trusts
901 E St. NW
Washington, DC 20004
(202) 552-2000

National Association of County-City Health Officials (NACCHO)
Community Design and Land Use Planning
<http://www.naccho.org/topics/environmental/landuseplanning/HIA.cfm>

Jacques Colon, Program Assistant

(202) 507-4207
jcolon@naccho.org

Jennifer Li, Director of Community Design/Land Use Planning

(202) 507-4242
jli@naccho.org

Habitat Health Impact Consulting www.habitatcorp.com

Human Impact Partners www.humanimpact.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—Healthy Community Design Initiative

www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces
1600 Clifton Rd.
Atlanta, GA 30333

RESOURCES

Planning for Healthy Places with Health Impact Assessment. This tutorial for conducting health impact assessments is available [online](#).

City and County of San Francisco have compiled some Health Impact Assessment tools and a list of staff contacts for each tool. Available [online](#).

The final Yellowstone County and City of Billings 2008 Growth Policy Update can be found [online](#). Contact information is listed for City of Billings Planning Department staff members.

[Healthy Places Initiative at RiverStone Health](#) includes links to some Health Impact Assessment Tutorials. In the future this will link to any completed HIAs.

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