

Environmental Justice and Health Disparities: An Exploratory Conversation in King County October 5, 2006

These notes are a synthesis of the near-verbatim notes recorded by the note takers at the EJ/HD Conversation and are meant to capture the essence of the day's dialogues.

Welcome and overview of meeting agenda (9:00 a.m.):

Elise Miller, executive director of the Institute for Children's Environmental Health (ICEH) and coordinator of the Collaborative on Health and the Environment in Washington State (CHE-WA), welcomed all meeting participants to this first exploratory session on environmental justice and health disparities in King County.

She noted that the overarching purpose of the session is to convene approximately 30 agency, community-based, tribal and non-profit leaders in the Seattle area to share their current initiatives addressing environmental injustices and health disparities. The fundamental goal of the conversation is to better understand what each of us is doing, assess existing gaps, and explore how participants might better support each other's efforts and potentially collaborate more strategically and effectively. All participants work in similar areas and yet do not always know what project or initiatives other people are working on. The planning committee hopes that this is the first of many conversations that ultimately help to improve the health of our communities.

Elise then explained that CHE-WA is a state chapter of the national Collaborative on Health and the Environment. CHE-WA has more than 330 researchers, healthcare providers, members of health-affected groups, environmental health and justice advocates and other concerned citizens committed to addressing environmental health issues linked to chronic health concerns in Washington State. CHE-WA's overarching goal is to promote the cross-pollination of ideas and opportunities between different sectors concerned with environmental contributors to chronic health problems in order to create a safe and healthy future for all in the Northwest. CHE-WA supports multiple working groups, including one that focuses on Environmental Justice (EJ). The EJ Working Group has held many meetings over the past couple years where participants have asked what and how the collaborative can add to current EJ efforts in the region. After many conversations, the EJ Working Group decided to collaborate with health disparity advocates and organize this exploratory session.

She offered her deep thanks to:

- Planning group members, including Chetana Acharya, Morgan Barry, June Belefond and Linn Gould, for directing session planning efforts throughout the summer.
- The sponsors, including: Casey Family Foundation (for the space), the Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, Environmental Protection Agency - Region 10, Health Justice Network, Institute for Children's Environmental Health Public Health - Seattle & King County, University of

Washington's Center for Ecogenetics and Environmental Health, UW Superfund Basic Research Program, and the Russell Family Fund.

- Facilitators Antoinette Angulo and Cheri Baker for giving their services pro bono.
- Note-takers Nanda Blazej, Diane Cortese, Brittany Gallagher and Kam Yee for their services.

Elise reminded the group of the ground rules for the session:

- Turn off phones
- Begin and end session on time
- Encourage everyone to participate
- Speak one at time
- We do not need to agree or come to consensus but we all do need to be respectful
- Try to see common ground whenever possible
- Remember we are all interdependent even if we have differences
- We are all here to learn as a collective

June Beledford, Public Health-Seattle & King County and part of the session planning committee, explained that the planning committee developed a working definition of environmental justice and health disparities to share with the participants today. Though both concepts are complex and difficult to define, the planning committee chose a definition that seemed to best capture the core understanding of these issues from the readings for this session. In this context, environmental justice and health disparities refers to:

“... the unequal burden of environmental hazards borne by racial and ethnic communities, low income populations, and the disproportionate exposure to toxins based on geography, socio-economic status, age, gender, education and other determinants that have adverse outcomes on our physical and mental health and well-being.”

The facilitators explained that after introductions, participants would divide into two groups:

- 1) Community-based organizations (CBOs), tribal groups, non-profits
- 2) Agencies and academics

People will start within their respective sectors to know better what their peer groups are doing and then report back to larger group. The afternoon session will be with the entire group and will include more discussions about moving forward.

Participants then briefly introduced themselves and mentioned their affiliations before dividing into the two groups.

Group Discussion: CBOs, Tribal, Non-profit

Antoinette facilitated this group of 20 people. She explained that the entire workshop, and the breakout session in particular, is about building community for all people working toward environmental justice and eliminating health disparities. Participants (see list below) spoke about what brought them here today and what they would like to get out of the session. Though people's specific reasons for attending were diverse, similar themes arose such as personal experiences of environmental injustice or health disparities in communities that had not been adequately addressed, or children (their own or others) who had been sickened by exposures to pollution. The vast majority of people also expressed their hope that we could have an honest conversation about these tough issues and figure out more effective and concrete ways to work together in King County.

Antoinette Angulo - Facilitator/Group Health Community Foundation

June Beleford - Health Justice Network

Chloe Birnel - Huxley College at Western Washington University

Nanda Blazej - Note-taker/Cascadia Consulting Group

Diane Cortese -Note-taker/Antioch University

BJ Cummings - Duwamish River Cleanup Coalition

Charlie Cunniff - Environmental Coalition of South Seattle

Michael Davis - Seattle Public Utilities Community Services Division

Patty Foley - Georgetown Community Council

Linn Gould - Population Health Project

Leah Henry-Tanner - Native American Women's Dialog on Infant Mortality

Elise Miller - Institute for Children's Environmental Health/CHE-WA Coordinator

Alice Park - Seattle Indian Health Board

Julian Perez - Washington Health Foundation and South Park Violence Collaborative

Kata Ritenburg - Georgetown Community Council

Margaret Shield - Toxic-Free Legacy Coalition

Yalonda Sinde -Community Coalition for Environmental Justice

Robin Tomazic - Georgetown Community Council

Heather Trim - People for Puget Sound

Kristine Wong -Community-Campus Partnerships for Health

The following are the summary reports for each question shared with the CBO/non-profit section as well as with the entire group after lunch:

Who is at risk? Who currently benefits from your work?

RISK:

Workers in industries with high exposures, indigenous populations, Asians and Southeast Asians, homeless, marginalized groups or those who were the least educated were mentioned as especially impacted. Infants and children were also noted.

BENEFITS:

When talking about who benefits, there were a range of responses reflecting target populations from the organizations represented in the session. One interesting response was: “potentially everyone but especially those with the loudest voices.”

Who decides on actions and priorities and how are decisions made within your organization?

Three main categories for how decisions are made emerged: top-down traditional structure, mixed approach, consensus-based both from community and within organizations.

Other common themes for how decisions are made included: groups react and reflect the community; board member projects; organizational mandates; strategic planning objectives; funder blinders—i.e. funders focused solely on one issue and not understanding other related concerns or mandating a certain area of activity; organizational staff have own personal agendas.

One participant commented that people are often fooled by having “community” in an organization’s title. If programs come from constituents or impacted community members, then you know it is really a community-based group (i.e. CCEJ). Real community organizers have to prove that they have the ear of the community. That is why it is important to say how decisions are made. Consensus can mean different things.

Where does your group or institution get its funding?

Responses were grouped into seven main sources: 1) Individuals; 2) Seattle/King County; 3) Washington State; 4) National level; 5) contracts; 6) “free” money, meaning it is gifted by a donor, though often there can still be some strings attached, and 7)volunteers.

Some highlights of the discussion included:

- Some non-profit, community-based organizations get hired by the government as a “consultant” for their community-based expertise. This is different from getting a grant and is perceived differently by the community.
- Different sources of money evoke different senses of freedom depending on the funder—government, private foundation, individual donor, etc.
- How can you really hope to change the overarching power structure if the power is the one giving resources/grants? One can see the impact of institutional racism when it comes to who gets contracts and who does not.
- An internal group working within King County government is developing ways to reduce insurance fees so small firms can bid on contracts.

- Because of the recent and significant cuts in federal and regional funding for the EPA, they are not allowed to do more work in-house and have to hire consultants by contract.
- It would be helpful to explore developing proposals that would fund groups to collaborate on initiatives.

What else would you need to make your program/efforts more successful?

Some ideas and suggested that emerged included:

- More collaboration is needed so as not to reinvent the wheel.
- More data and research are needed, (although one participant commented that there is already a lot of data out there and what really matters is how policy-makers use the data).
- If community groups could get some of the money that goes into government contracts (by service as consultants or experts), then maybe CBOs could get more work done.
- Create a website where ideas can be shared and information about who is doing what can be accessed.

What informal efforts do you know about in addition to your current work?

Participants responded with the following ideas about other informal and formal efforts going on in the region:

- Many people are currently looking at impact of gentrification, land-use and built environment and the relationship to environmental justice and health.
- The impact of air quality in Duwamish on humans as well as aquatic species in river.
- There are many organizations not currently in the room that work on specific health problems or diseases. Some issues overlap with environmental justice and health disparities. The American Lung Association and various cancer associations for example address groups impacted by health issues.
- King County National Airport Roundtable that addresses noise and air pollution issues.
- Philips Services is working on sewer overflow issues and underground groundwater contamination.
- Emergent African American Women's Dialogue on infant mortality.
- With the upcoming election, both parties are targeting Asian and Latino voters. Maybe those communities can use this opportunity to get their issues on the national and local agendas.

Group Discussion: Agency Representatives:

Cheri Baker, the Agency group's facilitator, welcomed ten participants (listed below) to a small, bright room. Most participants came with the goals of finding out what others were doing about environmental justice issues and exploring how different groups can work together.

Cheri Baker - Facilitator, Emergence Consultants
Morgan Barry - Public Health - Seattle and King County
Marc Brenman - Washington State Human Rights Commission
Jackie Madsen - Puget Sound Clean Air Agency
Leo Melendez - Public Health - Seattle & King County - Local Hazardous Waste Management
DouGlas Palenshus - Washington State Department of Ecology
Gary Palcisko - Washington State Department of Health
Victoria Plata - Environmental Protection Agency - Region 10
Karen Snyder - Public Health - Seattle & King County
Dana West - Wastewater Treatment in King County
Melanie Wood - Environmental Protection Agency - Region 10

After introductions, Cheri divided the group into small teams to answer the questions outlined in the day's agenda. Responses are detailed below.

What is your organization doing around environmental justice issues?

Responses varied widely. Fundamentally, it was clear that all groups are trying to learn from each other so to build their respective environmental justice programs, but all groups have different mandates and therefore very different activities. Some are already involved in community EJ efforts, while others are still finding out what EJ means, as evidenced by the training and educational programs going on.

It was noted that everyone seems to want to collaborate. However, since everyone is at a different place in terms of their programs, collaboration has only occurred on the level of occasional networking. The interest now is to figure out the “ecology” of the diverse groups to determine how organizations can both complement each other and collaborate together on specific priorities.

Who is at risk? Who currently benefits from your work?

Some respondents presented the concept of risk as a continuum. In other words, many factors contribute to what makes us healthy or not and what is a risk to one person may not be as much of a risk for another depending on other factors. Plus, the level and timing of exposure is critical and not always discernable. In addition, we are all more at risk to environmental hazards than we were several decades ago because there are very few places left on the planet with totally clean water, air or soil.

Several people identified who's at risk in specific geographical communities or specific cultural communities. The responses on who benefits were more general, such as "residents of King County," etc.

Who decides on actions and priorities and how are decisions made within your organization?

Generally, participants in this group agreed that leadership appears to set the direction with varied input from technical staff and community representatives. It was also suggested that agencies often don't appear to be using the advisory boards that already exist. Plus, community members rarely have access to decisions and community involvement in the decision-making process is lacking.

Where does your group or institution get its funding?

The main source for this group is taxpayer dollars. There is some from fees, permit fees and penalties. There is none or very little from corporate or individual donors in the form of grants.

What else would you need to make your program/efforts more successful?

The three emergent themes were: 1) money; 2) people; and 3) collaboration/resources. Participants noted the need for internal collaboration – i.e., cooperation from the leadership inside the office – before external success would be possible. Adoption of new structures and visibility of specific programs and actions within the organization are important to success.

A conversation about institutionalized racism and uncommitted leadership ensued. Several participants noted that these are definitely problems within their organizations and that often the institutions are founded on racist policies.

Additional comments included:

- Instead of pointing fingers and looking for excuses, it would be more helpful to turn to the question of who is not getting resources.
- We have to address what's occurring now and undo the damage that's been done. For example, we have the ability to stop the poor land use management.
- Political power disparities, as well as racist policies, are partially to blame for the existing problems.
- The homogenous makeup of our workforce affects the work we do. Some policymakers at the state level are absolutely unaware that the demographics of the state are changing rapidly (for example, the growing Latino population). A simple lack of diversity in that office leads to ignorance.
- Community dialogue and communication is also missing. We need to create a process for community involvement so the public can have input.

The group also had a conversation about the use of the phrase "people of color," which some participants found offensive since we all have a color. One suggestion was to use terms such as "traditionally discriminated against."

Afternoon Session

After lunch, Agency and Community-Based Organizations reported on their conversations from the morning.

1) What are you doing organizationally or individually within your organization around EJ and HD?

Government group

The agency representatives reported that they are still trying to collaborate and learn from each other to make contacts to build EJ programs. Differing mandates and levels of understanding of EJ and its issues are an obstacle to collaboration. There are still ways they can work together - for example, having a Washington State EJ initiative like the one Oregon has.

Community Group

Community/non-profit representatives reported a lot of overlap in what they are doing. They noted a strong focus on creative expression, youth, specific toxics, education and health. Most organizations are involved in outreach education, curricula, and attempts at cultural appropriateness. However, several participants noted that there is a split at this meeting between institutional/academic organizations and on-the-ground groups, specifically under-representation of tribes and lack of representation of homeless communities.

2) Who is at risk and who benefits?

Government Group

Agency representatives reported that their responses highlighted specific ethnic communities and specific geographic communities as at risk. Contrastingly, in terms of who benefits, the agency focus was much broader. They also noted that risk is a continuum, and that if people realize that everyone is at risk they are more likely to get involved.

Community group

Community/non-profit representatives also listed that everyone is at risk but noted that there were several specific communities mentioned at higher risk - low-income communities, immigrants, refugees and uneducated communities. A lot of emphasis was placed on Duwamish and marginalized communities in South Seattle.

Community representatives also came up with a broad range of communities who benefit, specifically Latinos, urban American Indians, South Seattle residents and the poor. Missing groups today are workers in more exposed industries and Asian groups. An interesting comment was that "those with the loudest voices benefit the most."

3) Who decides actions?

Government Group

Government representatives reported that generally leadership sets directions, with varied input from technical staff as to whether they had access to leadership. What was missing is community access to decisions and use of advisory boards, especially at the state level. It was noted that communities may have a voice, but lack decision-making power in most cases.

Community Group

Community-based representatives divided decision-making models into three categories: top-down organizations, consensus-based (staff) organizations and community process organizations. Some organizations used a mix of these models.

This group also noted that issues affecting their missions included board member pet projects, funders' favorites and project staff's particular interests.

Differences in organizational structures were noted. According to participants, some community groups do not want their organizational structure to mirror the oppressive systems that create the problems they're addressing, and that's why many CBOs are consensus-based. The differing organizational structures often cause a culture clash when CBOs try to work with agency organizations.

4) Where is the funding?

Government Group

The agencies get money from federal, state and local tax dollars, permit fees, civil penalties and a few other sources, not including individual donations.

Community Group

Community organizations receive money from individual donations and also get funding at the city, county, state and national level. Many rely on volunteer work and 'free' money (often coming with strings attached). A couple representatives have contract work.

5) Needs for programs?

Government Group

Government representatives cited a need for more money, resources and personnel. Some agencies are having those very things cut instead of built up. Collaboration within as well as outside of the agency is crucial. Agency representatives noted that they had passionate discussion about institutional racism, ignorance (even among so-called progressives) and power inequity.

Community Group

Community representatives also noted money and collaboration. They want to know what others are doing, and would rather consolidate forces to make a bigger impact and save energy. There is need for more data and research in a form that policy makers understand and see as valid.

One community representative suggested that since agencies like EPA are required to contract out for services, they should consult community-based organizations as experts.

One suggestion for collaboration was a web page as a centralized resource, a living document where people can continue to link so we can map what everyone working on EJ and HD is doing.

Other comments and suggestions during this session included:

- Using documentation by youth on issues such as illegal dumping, crime, drugs, unhealthy food, etc.
- Working with crime prevention groups might be useful because they deal with EJ indirectly and are in charge of many community actions.
- Land use, transportation and walkability are rarely considered when thinking of poor communities.
- There should be more access to funding resources and more outreach to tell people about them.
- We need to use the media better to highlight these issues.
- Environmental educators might be good allies.
- If we broaden our focus of EJ issues to encompass all social dilemmas we may lose our "bite."
- There are silos in and among agencies that community groups must punch through to get their needs met.

Groups working on similar issues:

- Farm working groups focused on pesticide issues
- Tribal groups working on sustainable development and equity issues
- The city's Race and Social Justice Initiative
- International District Housing Alliance and partner groups

After the reports, the whole group addressed the following:

- a) What are the commonalities that emerged from the two groups?
- b) What are the differences?
- c) What/Who is missing?
- d) How can we improve our respective and collective work?
- e) Are there collaborative opportunities?
- f) What are specific next steps for us?

What are the commonalities that emerged from the two groups?

- More money
- More meaningful collaboration, whether with other organizations or inside an office
- More staff
- A better definition of issues
- Help in reaching communities and vice versa
- A cohesive understanding and message as to who is responsible, because no one is solely responsible for fixing E.J. issues. We should end this assumption and just figure out how to get the job done.
- Strong commitment to breaking through dialogue barriers to work on issues with other groups both within agencies and between organizations
- Job insecurity because of budget cuts at government level, lack of funding at community level
- Across-the-board agreement that it is wrong that parts of our society are unfairly saddled with exposures and outcomes of environmental contaminants

What are the differences?

- Accountability issues
- Working within a box/silos versus working within the reality of the community
- Community groups are driven by the community and can't reject its priorities
- Government groups' mandate to help everyone versus community groups' ability to help one located group
- Sources, consistency and allocation of money - funders, legislators, etc. Financial constraints are different
- Job security issues for taking risks at government level
- Decision-making and leadership models
- Different political views within a government organization; fairly similar views within a given community/non-profit organization

What/Who is missing?

- More men
- Homeless
- Youth
- Urban Planners
- Transportation planners

- Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender, Verbena
- International District Housing Alliance
- Pacific Islanders
- Immigrant and refugees
- Politicians and other decision-makers
- Elderly
- Tribal community-based organizations
- Non-English speakers
- More of those who generally cannot make day meetings
- Religious community
- Health providers
- Environmental educators
- Industrial management
- Industrial workers
- Unions
- More health-affected groups
- Other community groups or neighborhood groups
- Non-affiliated community members
- Leadership training organizations
- Corporations, polluters, waste manufacturers

There is a discussion as to whether or not corporations should be invited. One person commented that having corporate representatives in the room hearing about EJ issues might make them more accountable, while others said corporations tend to lead the discussion in these cases and the group might want to get better organized first.

e) How can we improve our respective and collective work? What relationships would you like to see between groups gathered here? What opportunities for collaboration exist?

Suggestions included:

- Improve link between government and clinics
- Press government to clearly define EJ and goals
- Collaborate to develop an EJ Initiative for Washington State as colleagues in Oregon did
- Challenge those who measure EJ impacts (epidemiologists, researchers) to do more community-based research
- Develop relationships with those who are in the position to mandate EJ/HD efforts
- Develop relationships with elected officials as well as industry and corporations
- Use the precautionary principle as a cornerstone for all our work
- Develop separate listservs between people who can be political advocates and those who can't, because many state employees cannot participate in political action nor can community members on paid government advisory councils
- Use this group as a go-to group of experts on EJ issues to meet with policymakers

f) What are specific next steps for us?

Participants voted on these ideas. The top three were:

- Develop and maintain an EJ “mapping” project that would graphically detail which organizations are doing what projects in King County and how they are related.
- Develop and maintain an EJ website with centralized data on organizations, trainings, etc.
- Work with different agencies and organizations that can help channel more funding to community-based organizations to empower and build their capacities.

Other ideas that received votes:

- Create individual/group recommendations for addressing health disparities and make data available to public (via media outlets, internet)
- Co-create a vision and action steps
- Develop more capacity-building trainings and support
- Offer neighborhood tours for agency staff to give people a concrete example of EJ issues
- Create an "EJ Offender" list
- Increase consciousness of institutional racism
- Participate in workshops for planners
- Encourage greater male involvement in EJ
- Target industry polluters to work with King County and advocacy groups to go to zero waste
- Develop focused community assessments that keep the community engaged, while avoiding questioning fatigue
- Document the stories of communities facing these issues

Follow-up:

- Elise Miller said ICEH could likely help with creating a centralized database to be posted on the CHE-WA website but money and staff resources for this are currently limited. She added that ICEH, however, could try to look for funding for that position. She noted that her staff is committed to compiling the notes for this meeting and working with Melanie Wood to create a CD with all the information and articles from this session for participants.
- Kristine Wong expressed interest in working on the EJ mapping project, though not necessarily in a leadership role. Heather Trim suggested that there was a computer program that could help with mapping.
- Yalonda Sinde offered to organize a meeting on finding greater funding for community-based EJ efforts in order to build their capacity. She circulated a sign-up sheet for that meeting.

Closing

Elise Miller thanked attendees, facilitators, note-takers and planning committee for their time and engagement in these important issues and their commitment to creating healthier communities for all.

Adjourn (2:30 p.m.)