

Health Impact Assessment: An Effective Strategy to Use in Organizing Campaigns and to Build Community Power

Introduction

A new NFL stadium – Farmers Field – was being proposed in downtown Los Angeles. Everyone was lined up in favor of the project – City Council members and the business community couldn't praise the proposal enough for the jobs and economic development it would bring, environmental groups were drawn in by promises of unprecedented transit access, and several community organizations were allured by the community benefits the developer proposed. Then a 10,000 page environmental document was released, and it became more clear that the promises weren't backed up by project details.

And no one had looked at the effects of the project on the human beings that lived in the area and on their health and well-being. The voices of residents – low-income and homeless folks, people of color – were missing. No one considered how the project would affect their lives. In fact, impacts on their housing, access to jobs and green-space, and safety were actively being ignored. The environmental document claimed that the housing supply, for example, would not be affected though similar projects in the area had had a huge impact on housing.

Overview

This paper highlights for community organizers how a health perspective broadly, and Health Impact Assessment specifically, can be an effective strategy to use in organizing campaigns, build community power, and bring about policy wins.

We provide background on HIA, brief examples of how it has been used in organizing, a more detailed case study of an incarceration-related HIA conducted in Wisconsin, examples of HIA and organizing wins, and several challenges to doing this work. We also provide some simple steps organizers can take to take to build their capacity around HIA.



In this context, the Play Fair Farmers Field Coalition, led by the Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN), started a campaign to ensure that the effects of the project on these residents (who were also their members) were taken into consideration. This campaign was one component of larger efforts to stop gentrification and the criminalization of low-income residents and people of color in downtown Los Angeles.

The coalition decided to frame the campaign from a health and well-being angle and to [use a new tool called Health Impact Assessment](#) (HIA) to organize residents, develop leadership, gather data, and, ultimately, to build their power to engage in the decision-making process around the stadium. They worked with the nonprofit organization, Oakland-based [Human Impact Partners](#) (HIP), to complete the HIA over a three-month period, and had a draft version ready by the end of the 45-day public comment period for the environment review documents.

To run the HIA, LA CAN assembled twelve local leaders who were members of grassroots organizations from diverse areas that surrounded the stadium. These organizations – who represented homeless residents, low-income tenants, day laborers, transit riders, etc. – had not typically worked together on downtown development issues, but using the health angle brought them together and gave them a holistic approach to frame a wide range of issues their members faced. Working with HIP, this group learned about the stadium development, decided what they wanted to study in the HIA, conducted a survey of local residents, reviewed local data, and came to consensus about the likely effects of the stadium and recommendations that could mitigate those effects. They then held a press conference, met with elected officials and the developer, and talked to the media.

In the end, the coalition used the HIA recommendations in negotiations to settle a lawsuit (which was related to the environmental review process) and won \$20 million in real community health benefits, which included \$15 million for affordable housing, funding for parks and open space, funding to support a community organizer and health worker for three years, and other benefits.

Why Use a Health Frame?

Health is not something we get at the doctor’s office. It is not health insurance. By the time we need doctors and insurance, we’re already sick.

While some of our health is a function of our genes and the personal choices we make, the reality is that over 50% of our health is determined by social and environmental conditions – like whether we have a job, where we live, and things like racism and sexism. The image below lists many of the factors responsible for our health.



Importantly, many of these factors – especially those in the outer three rings of the rainbow – are the same issues at the heart of our organizing efforts.

Using health and well-being as a frame in organizing campaigns can be effective. Health is a shared value across the political spectrum – no one would claim that they are not for improving health. The communities with whom we work understand health quickly and easily at a personal level and at the community level. They have a very good sense of why their communities are healthy/unhealthy, and calling attention to this can help engage them. Furthermore, we can measure various aspects of health – such as through hospitalizations and life span – that reflect better measures of quality of life than others (e.g., income). Last, the public is surprised and concerned by health inequities; for example, a report showing that there was more than a 24-year life span difference between populations that lived in the Cleveland suburbs and those in the inner-city made the front page of all the local papers recently.

What is Health Impact Assessment?

HIA is a flexible and practical approach that uses data, research, and stakeholder input to determine the positive and negative effects of a proposed policy or project on the health of a population and to make recommendations that improve those health effects. HIA is meant to be done before a decision is made, so that it can be used to inform decision makers and other stakeholders.

The values that underlie HIA practice are democracy, equity, sustainability, ethical use of evidence, and a comprehensive approach to health.

HIA practitioners are concerned with racial, economic, and gender equity and focus much of their effort on the vulnerable populations that are often most negatively impacted by government and private decisions.

There are two main purposes of a Health Impact Assessment. First, a *report and other communications materials* can be produced that:

- Makes the health effects of a proposed project, plan, or policy explicit;
- Highlights health inequities;
- Provides recommendations; and
- Raises awareness among those who are likely to be impacted, decision makers, and other stakeholders.

Second, the *process* of conducting an HIA is important. Through the process:

- Community members can be deeply engaged, empowered, and energized;
- Viable alternatives and recommendations can be developed, providing an exciting vision of what could be;
- The lived experience of community members can be recognized;
- Relationships and alliances can be built; and
- Transparency in decision-making processes can be improved.

HIAs have been conducted on many policy areas including land use, transportation and housing plans and projects; and energy, labor, education, incarceration, and immigration policy. Some examples are provided below.

Integrating HIA into a Campaign as an Organizing Strategy

There are multiple ways HIA can be used to support a community organization's goals. Most obviously, **HIA can gather new and convincing data that can be used as part of an organizing campaign.**

Knowledge is an important form of power that is not wielded as frequently as possible in campaigns. While facts do not always matter, not having facts is almost always a source of problems. Knowledge is vital when talking with community members, media, and decision makers.

For example, an HIA conducted on the [impacts of deportation and detention on immigrant children and families](#) revealed some shocking numbers: since 1998, at least 600,000 US-citizen had a parent or guardian deported, and if deportations were to continue unabated, more than 150,000 children will have a parent taken away from them each year. Furthermore, over 100,000 US-citizen children would show signs of withdrawal.

Through focus groups with undocumented parents, the HIA also revealed some heart-wrenching stories. One participant shared the following:

“Two years ago, Immigration [officials] came to look for someone in our house; someone who did not live [there]...it was very difficult impact that it caused for my children...my youngest son's performance in school suffered...[he became] fearful of everything, when somebody knocked on the door he would react in a very angry, nervous manner... he became constantly nervous, angry, he couldn't fall asleep, irritated...”

These numbers and stories make for powerful evidence that can support a campaign around an issue.

In addition, HIAs can help organizers build leadership and recruit new members. In conducting an [HIA on a proposed residential development in South Los Angeles](#), ACORN members built their skills by developing the questions on which the research focused, learned how to conduct a survey, and understood and presented the HIA findings and recommendations to decision makers. Those members went door-to-door in the neighborhood around the site to collect survey data. In collecting over 300 surveys, they were able to provide very local data for the HIA, discuss the proposed development with neighbors and thereby raise awareness, as well as build knowledge about ACORN and its organizing work. Some of these residents attended project-related activities and later became ACORN members. The HIA activities were a venue by which ACORN organizers could connect with the self-interest of community members and get to know them better.

HIAs can build new relationships for community organizations and strengthen existing relationships. [In conducting an HIA on school integration policy in Minnesota](#) ISAIH brought together community leaders with whom they were interested in building stronger ties. These included leaders of other organizations, school board members, union members, teachers, and academics. The HIA process created a space that allowed for deep discussion of issues such as race, segregation, and education, and built understanding and consensus among the various partners. These strengthened relationships will outlast the HIA, which was successful at influencing a piece of statewide legislation and in starting discussions with the Minnesota Department of Education.

ISAIAH is using a public health frame beyond individual HIAs. They are working with other community organizations in the Mid-West on an initiative called Healthy Heartlands, bringing organizing groups together with public health practitioners around issues their members care about, and that affect their health and well-being.

HIA can help to change an entrenched frame around a policy. Before the Paid Sick Days HIA was completed, lawmakers and the general public considered paid sick days a labor issue and a small business issue – not a health issue. The HIA raised a conversation about the public health effects of the policy, so much so that legislators asked anti-sick day lobbyists in testimony if they condoned passing disease in restaurants. HIAs can also explicitly start conversations about important topics that are priorities for your organization such as racism, environmental justice, and/or disparities in access to transportation and other public goods. In the School Integration HIA mentioned above, ISAIAH explicitly wanted to explicitly raise the discussion about structural racism and its harm.

Last, using HIA and the health frame can assist in drawing resources to organizing campaigns from funders who have traditionally focused on health. The California Endowment, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), and other funders have supported the HIAs discussed in this paper and provided funding to the community organizations involved, even though these funders do not typically support community organizing.

Case Study: An HIA on Alternatives to Incarceration

Wisconsin, like other states, is locking up growing numbers of non-violent drug and alcohol offenders. These people need treatment – not prison, where they're unlikely to get help. Prison disrupts families, increases recidivism, makes communities no safer, and costs far more than treatment. WISDOM – a statewide network of congregation-based justice organizations – launched the [11x15 campaign](#) to cut Wisconsin's prison population in half by expanding access to treatment programs.



WISDOM partnered with HIP, state agencies, academics, policy groups, and others to [conduct an assessment of the public health impacts of increasing funding to \\$75 million a year for Wisconsin's treatment and diversion programs.](#)

The year-long study drew on data from state and national diversion programs and insights from focus groups with offenders, their families and officials from the law enforcement, judicial, and public health systems.

The HIA, funded by the RWJF, found overwhelming evidence that expanding alternatives to incarceration would reduce the prison population, reduce crime, lower recidivism and strengthen families by keeping up to 1,600 parents a year out of prison each year. Because the cost of treatment is about one-fourth of the cost of putting someone behind bars, the state would also save up to \$2 for every dollar spend on alternative treatment programs.

The study has had a tremendous impact on the conversation around treatment over incarceration in Wisconsin. Every major media outlet in the state covered the release of the HIA and legislators from both parties have pledged support for an increase in funding for treatment alternatives. The budget recently passed increased funding, with promises of more to come. WISDOM continues to use the HIA in meetings with legislators, to strengthen relationships with the public health community, to organize their communities, and keep the issue in the media spotlight.

As WISDOM prepares for a statewide campaign on public transit funding, they are considering how to incorporate the public health frame and HIA into the process. The HIA will be an important component of the organizing campaign and messaging, and as such, WISDOM is talking about it early in the campaign development process as a strategy to supplement others they are considering.

Getting Started with HIA

Community organizations interested in pursuing Health Impact Assessment as a strategy in their campaigns can take some simple steps to get started. Human Impact Partners can help you do this, but other non-profits and public health departments may be able to help as well. Community organizations can:

- Ask someone with HIA experience to present on HIA to staff, members, and partners. This forum can include a brainstorm about current or planned campaigns the organization is considering and how an HIA could fit in.
- Host an HIA training. Many HIA trainings use a customized local case study as an example and can be a great way to jump-start the HIA process. Allies and decision makers can be invited to participate as well.
- Get involved in an HIA being conducted by a public health department or by another organization. Community organization staff and/or members could be part of a steering committee or participate in other ways.
- Learn more about using a health lens as an organizing frame by having discussions with others who have done so, such as organizations that have been discussed in this paper.
- Approach health funders about their openness to funding HIA work on the issues of concern to the community organization's members.

Keeping it Real About the Challenges with HIA

HIAs are not a silver bullet. While many HIAs have led to significant policy wins and achieved other important goals, the process requires a significant commitment of resources and energy. HIAs require dedicated staff time, not just for organizing, but for planning, data collection, and coordination. Required time and effort can compete with other organizational goals, so a strong commitment to the process is needed. Speaking with organizing colleagues that have participated in HIAs can provide a sense of the necessary resources.

The HIA process can take between three months and a year to complete and can cost between \$50,000 and \$150,000. It must be started and planned well in advance of a policy decision being made and the HIA process must align with the organizing strategy. Organizations will need to constantly assess how to align and re-align the HIA with their organizing goals. While this is a common issue for many organizing groups, it requires a degree of attention to make sure the research remains relevant to decision making. Having a clear timeline for the research and for the decision-making or policy target helps ensure success.

Many community organizations do not have the in-house technical resources needed to complete an HIA. As a result, they may partner with other, more technical, organizations to complete it. These new partnerships will require time to build trust and to ensure alignment of principles and goals. Given that the HIA process is quite research heavy, it also requires work to maintain the engagement of community members. Small stipends can help with this, and can also show that community members' participation is valued.

Relatedly, much research throughout history has alienated, and often exploited, community members for their knowledge and experiences. It is incredibly important that those conducting the HIA are transparent about the goals of the research, how it will be used, and how community members' voices will be integrated. Community members should also be provided the power and space to adjust the HIA process. Establishing principles of collaboration at the outset of an HIA can ensure this is clear to all participants.

Last, the new research that HIA's bring are far from a guarantee of success. As we all know, politics, money, and many other factors can be difficult to overcome. Expectations about what the HIA can achieve should be set realistically.

Conclusions

For social change advocates, HIAs provide valuable information on how proposed projects or policies could impact the health of their communities. The HIA process also provides an opportunity for partners to build relationships, find consensus, and engage community leaders.

Community organizing and Health Impact Assessment are a practical and powerful combination of strategies that have led to many wins. For example, HIAs have led to:

- Changes in proposed developments that improve neighborhood housing and employment conditions;
- The inclusion of community health effects in decision-making processes that would have otherwise not included such analyses;
- Changes in how policies are framed and debated to improve individual and public health;
- An increase in news coverage of community conditions and health as it relates to a policy decision;
- New collaborations between community organizations, public agencies, and other stakeholders to make sure health and equity are considered in decisions; and
- Increased participation in decision-making processes by community residents and empowerment of community organizations.

About Human Impact Partners:

Human Impact Partners is a national non-profit working to transform the policies and places people need to live healthy lives by increasing the consideration of health and equity in decision making.

For more information, see:

[Human Impact Partners website](#)

[A Health Impact Assessment Toolkit: A Handbook to Conducting HIA](#)

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