



Superfund Fact Sheet: Community Interviews

Office of Emergency and Remedial Response
Hazardous Site Control Division (5203G)

Quick Reference Fact Sheet

More than ten years of experience with the Superfund program has demonstrated the value of community input in planning a successful hazardous waste site cleanup. One important way EPA gathers information from the community is through personal interviews. By speaking with, and listening to, a variety of community residents, EPA can identify the issues that are most important to the people who live or work near a hazardous waste cleanup site. Community interviews can also help EPA uncover additional information about operations and disposal practices that contributed to contamination at the site. This fact sheet answers questions about the community interview process.

What are community interviews?

Community interviews are EPA's informal discussions with community members interested in a Superfund site. People interviewed include community leaders, local government officials, concerned citizens, environmental groups, potentially responsible parties (PRPs), and other persons interested in site activities. During the interviews, EPA representatives ask questions to gather information about the site and to learn more about people's attitudes and issues concerning its cleanup. In choosing whom to interview, EPA tries to get the broadest possible range of perspectives about the site.

Why does EPA conduct community interviews?

Since no two sites or communities are alike, EPA gathers community-specific information and uses it to plan how best to keep the public informed and involved during site cleanup. Among the many factors influencing public attitudes toward Superfund sites are: proximity to a public water supply; site accessibility; local experience with other hazardous waste sites, other government agencies, or PRPs; and the activity of local interest groups. The information gathered during interviews may also be helpful in planning the cleanup. For example, local citizens who have witnessed dumping may be able to suggest locations for sampling.

What kind of information is EPA seeking and how will it be used?

EPA is seeking first-hand information about the site and people's concerns about it. The Agency also wants to know how people in the community want to be involved in the cleanup process. Based on the specific concerns people have, EPA can develop a Community Relations Plan that responds to local needs for information and participation. The goal is to gather information, such as appropriate times and locations for public meetings, that will help ensure effective two-way communication and full public participation.

What is a community relations plan?

A Community Relations Plan (CRP) specifies how EPA will ensure that local residents can express their opinions and concerns, and how the public will be kept informed of all cleanup actions at a site. A CRP is prepared for each site and typically contains:

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- a capsule site description providing the basic historical, geographical, and technical details necessary to understand why EPA is addressing the site under Superfund;
 - an outline of key local issues and community concerns, including how the community has reacted to the site;
 - the types of community relations activities to be conducted at the site, their timing, and contingency planning;
 - a list of useful resources, such as local organizations and meeting places; and
 - a contact list of key community leaders, government contacts and interested parties. (The names and phone numbers of private citizens are not included in the public copy of the Community Relations Plan without their consent.)

Will I be able to see the Community Relations Plan once it has been developed?

Yes. The Community Relations Plan will be available for public review. The plan may also be provided to government officials, community groups, and environmental groups, as appropriate. For most site cleanups, EPA will establish at least one local information repository, where information such as the CRP, press releases, fact sheets, technical documents, and other information about a site is kept. Information repositories are usually located in public buildings such as libraries, schools, or town halls.

Who conducts the community interviews?

Community interviews are conducted by EPA personnel, including remedial project managers, community relations staff, and enforcement specialists. EPA contractors may also participate in community interviews. Interviews are arranged at mutually convenient times, at the interviewee's home, workplace, or at a local library, restaurant, or meeting hall, as preferred. Most interviews are with one or two individuals, although small group interviews of up to five or six people are not uncommon.

Will I be able to learn what's going on at the site during the community interview?

The primary purpose of the community interview is to collect, rather than disseminate, information. EPA realizes that citizens have many questions about sites in their communities, and EPA will try to answer your questions during the community interview. Mostly EPA is there to listen and learn from the interviewees. These interviews are opportunities for citizens to tell EPA what types of information they want and how they would like to be involved. Meetings to report to citizens about site activities are scheduled throughout the cleanup process separately from the interviews.

Will my name be released if I am interviewed?

No. Private individuals' names and addresses will be added to the community relations coordinator's files and mailing lists, but they will not be released. Community interviews are confidential. Only the names of official community representatives and government officials will appear in the document that is available to the public.

Why would EPA continue to conduct community interviews once the CRP has been drafted?

As cleanup activities proceed, concerns may change and new issues may emerge. By conducting additional community interviews, EPA has an opportunity to revisit community opinions and stay current with public concerns. EPA can also make sure it is providing citizens with the information they want and need. The Agency may even revise a CRP if the community desires greater participation in site activities.

Aren't community interviews and CRPs just "window dressing?"

No. EPA views these interviews and the CRP as its most valuable tools for ensuring that EPA and the community exchange information throughout the site investigation and cleanup, and that EPA selects the best remedy for a site.

People who want to be more involved with how EPA is handling the site investigation and cleanup, or its community relations activities, have other options. If independent technical expertise is desired at a site that is listed (or proposed for listing) on the National Priorities list (NPL), citizens can work with local community groups to apply to EPA for a Technical Assistance Grant (TAG) of up to \$50,000. TAGs can be used to hire a technical advisor who may: 1) review site-related documents and attend site-related hearings and meetings, 2) explain technical information to the group and the community, and 3) communicate group concerns to the EPA.

Will EPA listen to what citizens have to say?

Yes. For example, at one site in the Northeast, local citizens and an environmental group took a very active role in the Superfund process and achieved good results. They expressed concern that wells not originally included in the State's sampling plan were contaminated, and EPA agreed to expand the sampling plan. At a site in the Midwest, local residents and businesses were concerned that EPA's proposed cleanup plan would limit the use of a nearby lakeshore. In response, EPA developed a cleanup alternative which allowed the town to use the lakeshore.

EPA is developing the Superfund Accelerated Cleanup Model (SACM) to make hazardous waste cleanups more timely and efficient. This will be accomplished through more focus on the front end of the process and better integration of all Superfund program components. The approach involves:

- A continuous process for assessing site-specific conditions and the need for action.
- Cross-program coordination of response planning.
- Prompt risk reduction through early action (removal or remedial).
- Appropriate cleanup of long-term environmental problems.

SACM will operate within the existing statutory and regulatory structure. As SACM develops, there may be modification of certain policies noted in this fact sheet. However, overall priorities will remain the same: deal with the worst problems first; aggressively pursue enforcement opportunities; and involve the public in every phase of the process.

Regional Superfund Community Relations Offices

Region 1

Superfund Community Relations
Office of Public Affairs
EPA Region 1 (RPA-74)
#1 Congress Street
Boston, MA 02203
(617) 565-3425

Region 2

Community Relations Branch
External Programs Division
EPA Region 2 (2-EPD)
26 Federal Plaza
New York, NY 10278
(212) 264-7054

Region 3

Superfund Community Relations
Office of External Affairs
EPA Region 3 (3EA21)
841 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107
(215) 597-9905

Region 4

Superfund Community Relations
Waste Management Division
EPA Region 4
345 Courtland Street, N.E.
Atlanta, GA 30365
(404) 347-2643

Region 5

Superfund Community Relations
Office of Public Affairs
EPA Region 5
Metcalf Federal Bldg.
77 West Jackson Blvd.
Chicago, IL 60604
(312) 353-2073

Region 6

Superfund Community Relations
Hazardous Waste Mgmt. Division
EPA Region 6 (6H-SS)
1445 Ross Avenue
12th Floor, Suite 1200
Dallas, TX 75270
(214) 655-2240

Region 7

Community Relations
Office of Public Affairs
EPA Region 7
726 Minnesota Avenue
Kansas City, KS 66101
(913) 551-7003

Region 8

Community Relations Branch
Office of External Affairs
EPA Region 8 (80EA)
1 Denver Place
999 18th Street, Suite 1300
Denver, CO 80202
(303) 294-1144

Region 9

Superfund Community Relations
Hazardous Waste Mgmt. Division
EPA Region 9 (T-1-3)
75 Hawthorne Street
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 744-2178

Region 10

Community Relations Section
Hazardous Waste Division
EPA Region 10 (HW117)
1200 6th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98101
(206) 553-6901



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Environmental Protection
Agency (5203G)
Washington, DC 20460

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