



# Environmental Justice Fact Sheet

## *16<sup>th</sup> Street Health Clinic - Milwaukee, WI* *A Success Story*

The Environmental Health Education Project (EHEP) was designed to help people become more aware of environmental hazards (i.e., pollutants) found in their home environment and community. Funded in part by EPA's Office of Environmental Justice, it focused on a culturally diverse and low-income community located on the south side of the Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The project also helped residents learn how to reduce these exposures and resulting risks. The EHEP placed special emphasis on improving children's health.

Administered by the Sixteenth Street Community Health Center (SSCHC), the project targeted Hispanics, Southeast Asians, primarily Hmong and Laotians, and other ethnic groups living in the vicinity of the health center. The target area was approximately six and a half square miles, bordered by the Menomonee and Kinnikinnic rivers in the north and south respectively, and Lake Michigan in the east.

A 1995 survey of the target area found that most residents are poorly informed about health risks associated with exposure to environmental hazards. For example, the residents had much lower than expected awareness of the connection between respiratory illness and poor air quality. Southeast Asians respondents reported catching and consuming fish from local waters, but were unaware of health advisories about the risks of consumption of these fish.

Not knowing about potential health risks may be traceable to a culture that encourages self reliance among family groups and to language barriers that have prevented them from having access to public health information normally available through the news media such as local television and newspapers. Language and cultural differences continue to pose a major challenge to federal, state, local, and SSCHC official's efforts to reach out to Southeast Asians and others groups. Outreach is made much more difficult because of the need to develop a culturally appropriate strategy for each ethnic group within diverse communities.

The SSCHC has made significant progress in community education by making health related information available to neighborhood residents in the groups' native languages such as Spanish and Hmong. Some of these efforts may have influenced the

SSCHC has also embarked on a program to educate clinic patients and their families about the presence of harmful pollutants in or near their homes. SSCHC has also sent trained bilingual representatives to some patients' homes show them how to minimize harmful exposures. Under the Lead Screening and Outreach initiative, children with elevated blood lead levels were provided monitoring and follow-up services to reduce risk factors in the home and help prevent further lead poisoning.

Efforts were also made to remove hazards such as asbestos and lead paint in some older residences. While lead is generally viewed as a significant health problem removing lead paint remains a major challenge. One reason is that the majority of occupants are renters who have little, if any, influence or resources to ensure lead paint removal.

Although efforts are on-going to prevent pollution, reduce point source air and water emissions and clean up or improve hazardous waste sites in older, industrialized communities, residents continue to be exposed on a daily basis to pollution. Low income residents may lack the resources to make improvements on their homes to reduce lead paint hazards or have access to air conditioning to lessen exposure to air pollution. These residents cannot afford to relocate their families to other communities. In addition, language and cultural barriers may interfere with receiving information about health risks related to environment exposures. Signs posted regarding hazardous materials may be written in a technical language which is difficult to understand in English. These warnings cannot be understood and are ignored by non-English speaking or reading residents and by children of all ethnic backgrounds.

Because of outreach and education efforts made by SSCHC and other health organizations, the community is becoming much more aware of its surroundings. Families are getting more useful information in a form they can understand. They are learning what steps they can take to help prevent or reduce pollution in their homes and immediate neighborhoods.

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community's behavior by making residents more aware of their surroundings, but much still needs to be done.