

Center for Healthy Environments & Communities



University of Pittsburgh
Graduate School of Public Health
Department of Community &
Behavioral Health Sciences

<http://www.chec.pitt.edu>

Center for Healthy Environments & Communities

CHEC's mission is to improve environmental health in Western Pennsylvania.

The Center for Healthy Environments & Communities (CHEC) was founded in 2004 under a grant from the Heinz Endowments at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health. CHEC's mission is to improve environmental health in Western Pennsylvania through research, collaboration, teaching, advocacy, & community service. We strive to improve access to local environmental health information & to increase public awareness of environmental health issues. We also strive, by working with residents, organizations & agencies, to identify & address environmental health issues of importance to local communities, & so to educate & to empower people to improve the places where they live as well as their own lives & health.

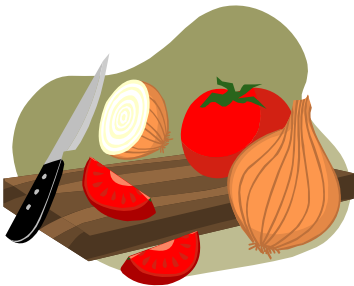
CHEC takes a community-based approach to social as well as physical aspects of local environmental health. Our focus is on environmental health as it is experienced by people, in particular by people living in low-income communities. Thus, for example, in addition to conventional environmental hazards such as air & water pollution, we consider the health impacts of urban sprawl & "bad neighborhoods" as well as the physical & social environmental conditions that influence smoking & nutrition. By starting with a broad view of environmental health & helping communities to define & prioritize their own environmental health issues, we believe that we set the stage for the community engagement essential for the success of our efforts.

It is hoped that CHEC will become a national & international model for building alliances designed to mobilize multiple stakeholders--including policy-makers, businesses, academics, non-profit groups, community groups & individuals--to improve local health & well-being.

CHEC is focusing initially on key environmental issues especially important to health & wellness.

Outdoor air pollution

Pittsburgh is famous for having “cleaned up its act” with regard to outdoor air pollution, but substantial health risks still remain, especially for certain vulnerable populations, from diesel, ground-level ozone, fine particulates, & other components of local air.



Food & diet

Food & diet, which are linked to heart disease, obesity, hypertension, diabetes & certain cancers, have perhaps the largest impact of any single environmental factor on local health today.

Homes & neighborhoods

Homes & neighborhoods are a natural focus for a community-based approach to local health & the environment.



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CHEC's progress & goals fall under six programmatic areas.

During the first months of its existence, the Center has established a solid portfolio of core activities. A website has been developed (www.chec.pitt.edu), a number of collaborative research projects have been initiated, initial data for an environmental health “scan” has been collected, & the *Pittsburgh 2005: Health & the Environment* conference was organized. The Center is poised to expand its community environmental health efforts under six programmatic areas:

1) Data capacity-building for environmental health

In this area, CHEC aims to facilitate better use of local environmental health data, to review the state of local EH data & lay the groundwork for collaboration with key data actors, to produce a public report on the state of the data, to document regional health trends, & to prepare a periodic report to be shared with policy-makers, community groups & the public at-large. In the next year, we will complete, publish, & promulgate our state of environmental health data report. Beyond this period, we will continue to work on reports related to environmental health in the Pittsburgh region.

2) Community capacity-building for environmental health

CHEC has taken a focused local approach to building community capacity to engage in improving environmental health by developing & expanding model programs at Peabody High School, a Pittsburgh public high school serving a largely low-income African-American population in the city's East End. Our activities in this area correspond to four aims:

- To establish a sustainable mechanism for involving university students & City of Pittsburgh high school students in environmental & community research & service in partnership with local agencies & organizations.
- To strengthen the Health Careers Academy (HCA) at Peabody.
- To help establish a strong Environmental Careers Academy within the Pittsburgh Public School system.
- To establish broad-based institutionalized mechanisms to effectively & continually improve health & nutrition in the Pittsburgh Public Schools by (1) helping to establish Coordinated School Health Councils at all high schools in the District, & (2) by ensuring the formation of an effective Health Policy Committee at the District level.

3) Collaboration

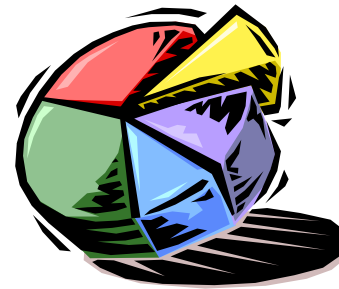
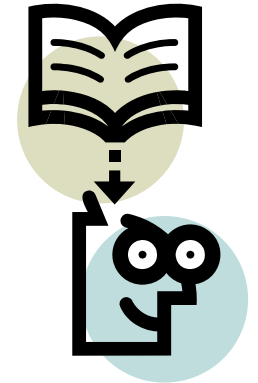
CHEC aims to serve as the convener for a local inter/intra-university consortium on community environmental health. Collaborations are underway between CHEC & University faculty across several Departments & Centers. In addition, we have ongoing involvement with many other committees & organizations, including the following community groups, non-profit organizations, & governmental agencies:

- Center for Environmental Oncology (Dr. Ali is the Clinical Director)
- City of Pittsburgh Planning Committee on Obesity & the Built Environment
- Collaborative on Health and the Environment in Pennsylvania
- Earth Force
- EatSmart Advisory Board
- Healthy Air Working Group
- MAYA Design web data project group
- Pennsylvania Health Atlas Project
- Pittsburgh Community Garden Group
- Pittsburgh Public Schools Career Development Steering Committee
- Pittsburgh Public Schools Health Policy Committee

- Pittsburgh Transportation Equity Project/Environmental Justice Institute
- Pittsburgh Vacant Lot Task Force
- RAND East Liberty CBIT
- UNEP/SCOPE working group on environmental change & emerging infectious diseases

4) Education

CHEC aims to provide education about & promote interest in community environment health to the public & to key academic & non-academic constituencies.



5) Research

Over the past months, besides work on our environmental health data report, CHEC has embarked on a research agenda that examines effective methods for improving community environmental health. Our approach is to conduct research that empowers communities to deal effectively with environmental issues & to involve communities throughout the research process.

6) Policy

CHEC expects to become a strong voice for policies that will improve community environmental health. We aim to influence policy by (1) improving EH data & its use, (2) networking, (3) working in committees, (4) media appearances, (5) research, (6) grassroots community work, & (7) education.

Project Highlight: Environmental Health in the Pittsburgh Region—Toward an Assessment of the Current State of Information

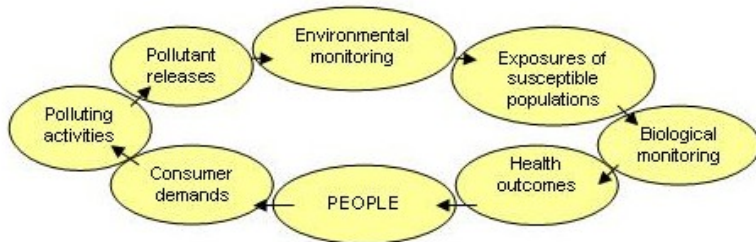
We have compiled a report on the state of environmental health data in the Pittsburgh region, for which we are continually seeking feedback.

Our goal is to create the foundation for a consolidated information inventory & data needs assessment that will benefit numerous information producers & consumers within the environmental health community & help to direct future energies in this area.

We are collecting information about the pertinence, availability & major strengths & weaknesses of the data; & descriptions of current endeavors that have already compiled & creatively linked information. The report reflects the idea that interactions between environments & people occur in both directions:

ENVIRONMENTS ↔ PEOPLE

It covers various sources of data relating environmental pollutants to human health outcomes along nodes of the following model:



Additionally, we are describing data pertinent to the interaction between the built environment & public health (e.g., transportation, residential characteristics, & businesses & other amenities).

Project Highlight: College After School Team (CAST)

The CAST (College After School Team) is a program that allows university students to participate in an after-school program for high school students at a local urban high school.

The CAST provides a framework wherein university students can collaborate with high school students on projects related to school, community, & environmental issues impacting health, well-being, & achievement. The program appeals to university students interested in a variety of fields.



While engaged in group learning processes & projects, university students also serve as role models & exert positive peer pressure to prepare the high school students they work with for college. More broadly, the CAST aims to help high school & university students alike learn how to take control of their lives, engage in improving their communities & environments, become leaders & agents of change, & move towards positive futures.

At the onset of the program, university students receive training in effective mentoring, in working in groups, & with Earth Force, in a problem-solving process for approaching community & environmental problems. The CAST then meets at Peabody High School on Fridays from 2 to 5 PM during the academic year. Besides the Friday sessions, university students in the program also spend 2 additional hours per week, arranged at their own convenience, working on projects with high school students.

In Spring 2005, more than 50 local university students participated through a University of Pittsburgh course coordinated with the program! The students have formed their own formal organizational structure, are writing grants, & are able to enroll in an AmeriCorps program called Scholars in Service.

CHEC offers many opportunities for you to get involved.

Working with communities

- Interviewing individuals about their concerns & suggestions on local environmental issues
- Mentoring young people
- Organizing focus groups for problem solving

Working with groups

- Meeting & collaborating with environmental organizations
- Networking with other departments at the Graduate School of Public Health & the University
- Planning conferences with organizations

Collecting & managing information on local environmental health

- Gathering neighborhood data for decision-making (for example, using GIS to map vacant lots, community gardens, or food stores)
- Locating data & publications for the Center's environmental health database
- Working on a regional environmental health report that summarizes available data, trends & indicators

Researching & reporting on questions, such as:

- What are the best peer-based approaches to environmental health education?
- How can an academic center best help communities identify & reduce asthma triggers in public housing?
- What environmental health indicators are most relevant to local communities?
- How do diverse environmental factors influence pregnancy outcomes?

CHEC has a diverse range of expertise.

Robbie Ali, MD, MPH, MPPM, Director

Robbie joined GSPH in Jan. 2004 with a joint appointment in Behavioral & Community Health Sciences & Environmental & Occupational Health. Born & raised in Pittsburgh, he has worked for 14 years as an emergency physician. He has also worked in medicine & public health in Antarctica, Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, St. Lucia, & Taiwan. He trained in Occupational & Environmental Medicine at the Harvard School of Public Health & is Board Certified in this specialty. He collaborates with The Nature Conservancy & the Government of Indonesia on a health initiative for rainforest-dwelling peoples, part of an effort to protect endangered orangutans in Borneo. In Pittsburgh, he is particularly interested in promoting adolescent wellness & skill-building, vegetarian nutrition, sustainable living, & community gardens & green spaces in low-income areas.

Andrea Arrington, Graduate Research Assistant

At Middlebury College, Andrea studied biochemistry to foster a love of food, cooking, & a fascination with human metabolism. During two years as an admissions counselor, Andrea determined that she would dedicate a significant portion of her life's work to helping young people realize & develop their gifts. Interests in nutrition, international health, & education brought Andrea to the University of Pittsburgh's MPH program in 2003. At CHEC, Andrea values working with the students & staff of Peabody High School. Andrea is especially interested in how the combination of mentorship & scholastic & health education impacts adolescents' potential to achieve their goals & contribute to their communities.

Megan Cieslak, Graduate Research Assistant

At Allegheny College, Megan majored in Environmental Science with minors in Chemistry & Women's Studies. Her undergraduate thesis considered how our American understanding of nature influences & contributes to environmental problems. Megan then incorporated her interest in environmental justice into her career while working for a Pittsburgh based advocacy group. Also, she explored how art & community expression can promote revitalization through her involvement with FLUX, a multi-disciplinary arts series that travels around the city. As an MPH student at the University of Pittsburgh, Megan continues to integrate environmental health concerns with a community focus, & enjoys her involvement with CHEC activities including CAST.

Eric Hulsey, MA, Graduate Research Assistant

Eric is currently a doctoral student in public health at the University of Pittsburgh. He holds a master's degree in psychology & formerly worked as a family therapist for nonprofit organizations in Pittsburgh. He enjoys playing soccer & fishing, & is learning to play the banjo.

Maurice Randall II, MA, CPT, Consultant

A graduate of Howard University, Maurice has done campaigning, promotion & education on environmental health issues for the last five years, with Howard University Hospital, The Center for Creative Non-Violent Homeless Shelter, & most recently The Fund for Public Interest Research Group (PIRG). As a Canvass Director with PIRG he organized petition drives for better air quality in Maryland & organized the local community to take action against coal-burning power plants & medical waste incinerators. With CHEC & the Center for Environmental Oncology, he is developing programs to educate & empower the Southwestern Pennsylvania community.

Dan Volz, DrPH, MPH, Scientific Director

With 25 years of applied practice in environmental & occupational health, Dr .Volz is interested in community based participatory research (CBPR) programs relating environmental exposure of toxic & hazardous substances to human health effects. In 1983 he founded Volz Environmental Services, Inc. (VOLZ), Environmental & Occupational Health Consulting and Risk Management Corporation. Dr. Volz provided various services for the clean-up of the EPA's then 3rd most hazardous superfund site, the Bruin Lagoon, Chicora, Pennsylvania. He is also Project Director for the Amchitka Independent Science Plan Expedition, a program to determine whether there is any current threat to human health & the environment from radionuclide release into the Island's sea waters from three underground nuclear test shots & determine a baseline of biological data for long-term stewardship plan development.

Dave Wheatner, MSPPM, Research & IT Consultant

With a background combining psychology (Yale University), public policy & management (Carnegie Mellon's Heinz School), community counseling (Indiana University of PA), & several years of applied research in such areas as poverty, health, & education, Dave's interests include the psychological health impacts of our environments. As a bicyclist, he's also interested in the health impacts of trails & green space, suburban sprawl, & motorized vehicles. Dave previously managed the Baltimore

City Data Collaborative, a GIS-based community indicators project on urban child & family health & well-being. His graduate capstone project examined the role of rivers & the natural environment in sustainable community development, & he's provided consulting for community planning & civic engagement endeavors. At CHEC, Dave enjoys utilizing technical, people, & research skills to benefit communities.

Get involved with CHEC!

If you have questions or comments, or if you'd like to get involved, please let us know!

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**Robbie Ali, MD, MPH, MPPM
Director**

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