

Healthy Communities depend on Healthy Watersheds:

A call for collaboration among public health & watershed organizations



This document emerged in November 2012 from an informal meeting of public health officials, watershed managers and academics* hosted by the Network for Ecosystem Sustainability and Health at the Ontario Veterinary College. The group found common ground in the many potential benefits of closer collaboration between public health and watershed organizations and expressed a desire to expand the discussion. The following summary is a working document that we hope to refine through discussion and debate in intersectoral and interdisciplinary fora over the next six months.

Watershed and public health organizations share a common vision

Humans are fundamentally dependent on ecosystems for survival, yet our awareness and understanding of this critical connection is fragmented. Our health and well-being are affected by the quality of our natural environment: it both supports and impacts health. Both individual species and the health of the public flourish when they have access to clear air, clean water and productive soil. As environmental problems become more severe and pervasive – locally, regionally and internationally - there will be more negative impacts on the health and well-being of our communities. To stop and ultimately reverse this trend, we need to take a more holistic and collaborative approach to our work. We need to increase our understanding of the real short- and long-term trade-offs and choices we are making in order to inspire better decision making.

Key areas of convergence between watershed and public health organizations include:



Values

Watershed and public health organizations share values that tie individual health to that of the larger community. Health professionals and watershed managers believe similar things - although potentially for different reasons - and need to find a common language to explore our common interests, such as shared:



- Concern with population and community health;
- Recognition that well-being is a holistic concept that requires new and non-traditional thinking about health and social programming;
- Commitment to promoting wellness and preventing illness and harm;
- Understanding that natural or green infrastructure (i.e. forest cover) is as fundamental as built infrastructure for sustaining human and animal health and well-being;
- Acknowledgement that citizens expect scarce resources to be effectively leveraged to achieve common societal goals;
- Appreciation of the need to address social and environmental determinants of health at multiple scales, including the watershed (e.g. to improve equity, social capital, education, water quality and quality, etc.), and
- Recognition that climate change is a watershed and a health issue; it is unavoidable and of serious concern.

Shared values lead us to protect and manage watersheds in order to gain the full benefit of the goods and services they provide, while playing to our respective strengths. Ecosystem goods and services are the foundation for healthy societies, and are urgently in need of protection for future generations.



Systems Approaches

Existing systems thinking in watershed and public health agencies could benefit from a better understanding of the complex interactions between natural and social systems and human health. Health and wellness arise from a complex web of interactions among coupled human and natural systems. Systems thinking focuses on the relationships, patterns, processes and functions within a given context. In this case, it acts as a common frame and approach to bring together public health, watershed organizations and other actors, such as planners and economists, to find solutions to complex challenges. Managing for health in a watershed offers the double dividends of improvements to both social and environmental determinants of health. There is currently a fragmentation of responsibility around health and its environmental determinants but shared goals. The need for collaboration is critical, and requires a collaborative approach at multiple scales.



Collaboration

Sharing information and perspectives between watershed and public health organizations can help enhance whole system thinking and improve health outcomes. Watershed organizations undertake activities to manage the natural environment, but not the public's health. Public health agencies are concerned about population health outcomes but have limited capacity to affect the physical and environmental determinants of health. Both are important, and we need to manage the whole system rather than separate parts of it. Collaboration will help to make better use of scarce resources and leverage others. We can share information, research, expertise, staff capacity and networks in order to work on communications, research, community engagement, reporting, planning and policy. We should support existing as well as potential new partnerships at the local level.

Communication, education and engagement

Aligned communications efforts can help people better understand the links between ecosystem and public health. We need to communicate the fundamental dependence of humans on ecosystems, as well as the convergence of mandates and the common goals of public health and watershed organizations to the public and decision-makers. It is critical to provide accessible information about trends in watershed conditions (land, water, air, nature, community), and make a clear link between the information provided and the health and well-being of the people who live, work and play in those watersheds.

Both internal and external communications require attention. We need to change the dialogue within our own sectors to enhance the credibility of the environmental voice in framing health issues and vice versa. Leveraging advances in the medical field and getting health professionals to speak directly to watershed issues in their regions is an important step. External communication should focus on creating a range of compelling stories and narratives for all audiences that speak to a variety of different values (economic, social, environmental) within the core message that human well-being is inextricably linked to the state of ecosystems.

Having researchers and community actors working together on knowledge translation will improve adaptive management and ultimately the work on the ground. The experiential learning, wellness, social capital and community mobilization built through watershed stewardship programs can be further enhanced by a strategic focus on watershed/public health messaging and collaborative programming. Currently, gaps in communication and collaboration make this kind of work difficult.

It is imperative also that we focus on communicating risk and uncertainty to a wide variety of audiences. We need to reframe the debate and re-think the kind of evidence that is important for making decisions about populations and their health. We need to focus on both the informal and formal education systems, and improve the breadth of understanding of systems approaches to the social and environmental determinants of health among today's students, professionals and decision-makers.

Recommendation and Next Steps

There is an as-yet-untapped community of practice that is committed to shedding light on the links between ecology and health in our society. It is time to harness this leadership to articulate common interests, work towards common goals and break down obsolete barriers. To do this we need to: understand each other's language; identify issues of common interest; collaborate on increased public awareness; and set long term visions while working on short-term projects. Specifically, we recommend that:

- This document be further refined to enhance our collective efforts to communicate the link between watersheds and human health and well-being clearly and succinctly;
- A strategic intersectoral approach be developed to gain official buy-in and influence public policy;
- New meetings take place – at multiple scales, from local 'lunch and learns' to formal symposia – to share information, identify leaders and champions and engage with additional sectors and disciplines;
- Collaborative, systems-based research be undertaken to help substantiate the positions put forward; and,
- Education and communication efforts be urgently prioritized.

*This document synthesizes the views of a group of individuals, and does not represent the official position of any given agency or organization. Meeting participants are listed in alphabetical order: Suzanne Barrett, Barrett Consulting; Martin Bunch, York University; Manon Fleury, Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC); Rob Keen, Trees Ontario; Tatiana Koveshnikova, Credit Valley Conservation Authority (CVCA); Jane Lewington, Conservation Ontario (CO); Andrew McCammon, Ontario Headwaters Institute; Barb Marshall, PHAC; Dean Middleton, Public Health Ontario (PHO); Sarah Minnes, University of Guelph (UofG); Karen Morrison, UofG; Lionel Normand, Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; Jane Parmley, PHAC and UofG; Katy Pintar, PHAC; Emily Peterson, PHO; Mike Puddister, CVCA; Jo-Anne Rzadki, CO; and, Barb Veale, Grand River Conservation Authority.

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