

## **RWJF and Pew award 6 grants to examine the impact of policy on people's health**

EurekaAlert

WASHINGTON — The Health Impact Project, a collaboration of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, today announced more than \$1 million in grants to six projects that will conduct health impact assessments at the state and local levels.

A health impact assessment (HIA) is a powerful tool that helps policy makers understand how a proposed project or policy could affect the well-being of the people in a community. The information provided by an HIA enables policy makers to weigh the pros and cons of their decisions and put in place practical strategies that minimize adverse health effects and maximize potential benefits.

The six projects — in California, Georgia, Hawaii, Minnesota, New Hampshire and Texas — are at the forefront of a burgeoning movement in the United States to ensure health is considered in sectors that do not traditionally factor it into their decision making. The HIAs will analyze the likely health effects of pending decisions, such as budget modifications being considered by a state legislature, transportation plans for the construction of a light-rail system and a land-use proposal to redevelop an abandoned factory site.

"These pioneering projects will provide many valuable lessons for other leaders in sectors that may not focus on health, but produce policies and programs that have clear ramifications," said Aaron Wernham, M.D., director of the Health Impact Project. "Health impact assessments can be used to weigh complex proposals and help decision makers craft solutions that avoid unforeseen effects and create conditions that give people every opportunity to lead healthy lives."

HIAs have been widely used in Europe, Canada and other countries, but are now emerging as a policy-planning tool in the United States. This approach can be used to address community concerns early in the planning process, generate stakeholder support and consensus and steer proposals swiftly through approval and implementation. Government agencies, universities, local communities and nonprofit organizations from all over the country are pursuing HIAs and capitalizing on this new trend in decision making.

"Many of the biggest decisions that impact our well-being are made outside of the health and health care sectors," said Michelle A. Larkin, J.D., M.S., R.N., senior program officer at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. "By enabling leaders in these sectors to factor health considerations into their decision making, we can help stem the rising tide of chronic disease and create safer, healthier communities."

The six grantees announced today are:

- The Center for Quality Growth and Regional Development (CQGRD), a research center of the Georgia Institute of Technology's College of Architecture, will conduct a comprehensive HIA on the site of a former Ford assembly plant. The location contained several contaminated industrial sites that were cleaned in preparation for the repurposing of this land. The 122-acre site, located in Hapeville, Georgia, adjacent to Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, is slated for the "Aerotropolis Atlanta" development project, which will result in over 6.5 million square feet of office, hotel, shopping and airport parking facilities, as well as a solar energy component. CQGRD will use the HIA to consider the project's range of potential benefits and impacts on surrounding communities, and to offer a series of practical measures to maximize health benefits, potentially positioning the Aerotropolis as a catalyst for healthy, sustainable living. The stakeholder engagement strategy ensures input from the community, developers, local agencies and other stakeholders and will incorporate these results into HIA findings. A final report is expected to be ready in June 2011.
- ISIAH, TakeAction Minnesota and PolicyLink are working together in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to conduct an HIA of proposed land-use changes related to a new light-rail transit line that will connect the Twin Cities. The Central Corridor Light Rail Transit line, which runs through low-income and immigrant communities in St. Paul, could have wide-reaching, positive impacts on health if it leads to a reduction in air pollution and increased access to grocery stores, parks and open space without residential and commercial displacement. Throughout the HIA, there will be an emphasis on stakeholder engagement to help build relationships between community members and organizations, key city and state agencies and policy makers, as well as ensure the HIA analysis focuses on issues key to impacted communities. Preliminary HIA findings are anticipated to be available by the summer of 2011. A public meeting will be held to share data, findings and recommendations upon completion of the project.
- The Kohala Center will work in partnership the Hawaii Department of Agriculture and Kaiser Permanente Center for Health Research, Hawaii to develop an HIA that guides the creation of an agricultural plan for the county of Hawaii. As a nonprofit research and educational institute, The Kohala Center has strong community and decision maker support for the HIA. It will look at the health effects of proposals that range from increasing the production of fruits and vegetables to setting aside more land for growing biofuel or agricultural crops for exportation. The HIA findings, anticipated in December 2011, will help the county council craft a plan that maximizes health while balancing a complex set of contending priorities. Some HIA recommendations might be adopted as new county regulations or ordinances and be used to inform state-level agricultural policies.
- The New Hampshire Center for Public Policy Studies, a nonpartisan, independent organization that pursues data-based research on public policy issues, will develop an HIA that will inform state lawmakers on the budget process beginning January 2011 and ending in June of the same year. The HIA will evaluate proposed state budget changes and show how funding

changes in these areas might affect the health of residents. A synthesis of HIA findings and recommendations will be presented at a policy forum in mid-2011 and will be made available to legislators for their consideration during the budget process. The HIA will be guided by an interdisciplinary advisory group with participants from the legislature, state agencies and several advocacy groups to maximize the effect the information has on the budgeting process.

- Texas Southern University, in collaboration with Houston Tomorrow and Baylor College of Medicine, will conduct an HIA to help inform Houston's Urban Corridor Planning project. The city initiative calls for transit-oriented development in 65 Houston neighborhoods through which a 30-mile, five-corridor light-rail expansion is planned. The HIA will examine potential health impacts that could result from the creation of city ordinances and incentives to promote transit-oriented development in the rail corridors. Increased access to public transportation and services, mixed land-use development and affordable housing are among the potential outcomes of transit-oriented development that could ultimately benefit health. This study will look at specific data and conditions for neighborhoods surrounding three of the planned rail stations. A multi-tiered plan for stakeholder involvement will help ensure that community and decision maker input is incorporated throughout the HIA process. Results are anticipated in late spring 2011. Decision makers will also be briefed directly on the final HIA recommendations.
- The University of California, Los Angeles School of Public Health and the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health will team up to conduct two health impact assessments. The first HIA will assess the potential health effects of a proposed subway and other mass-transit alternatives through Los Angeles' high-density, high-traffic Wilshire Corridor running from mid-town Los Angeles to the city of Santa Monica. A final HIA report, expected in June 2011, will provide evidence-based recommendations to maximize the health benefits of the Wilshire Corridor alternatives. In the second HIA, the project partners will help decision makers weigh the public health implications of different municipal water-conservation policies — another critical regional issue. HIA recommendations for this project will aim to address current, as well as long-term, projected water shortages tied to population growth and climate change.

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