

**Bureau of
Epidemiology**

Health Assessment Program

Mission

Since 1989, the Health Assessment Program (HAP) has partnered with the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) to protect the public health of residents from exposure to toxic substances from hazardous waste sites. The goals of the program are to:

- Prevent or reduce exposure and illnesses resulting from exposure to hazardous waste sites.
- Determine the human health effects associated with exposures to hazardous waste sites.
- Mitigate the risks of harmful human health effects at toxic waste sites in Pennsylvania.
- Provide health education to community members about the health effects of hazardous substances and how to reduce their exposure.
- Provide health education to health care professionals serving impacted communities



Services

- Public Health Assessments
- Health Consultation
- Exposure Investigations
- Health Education
- Technical Assistance

Public Health Activities

The following activities or products are offered by the HAP in order to address the public health issues surrounding hazardous waste sites:

- A **public health assessment** is a written document reviewing information about hazardous substances found at a waste site. It evaluates the potential for human exposure and harmful health effects. Public health assessments may make recommendations to environmental agencies about how to keep the community safe, such as replacing drinking water supplies, restricting site access, removing contaminated materials, or conducting additional environmental sampling. A public health assessment is prepared on each site proposed to the United States Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) National Priority List that are also known as Superfund sites. Pennsylvania is second in the nation for Superfund sites with 93 current and 4 proposed.
- **Health consultations** provide advice on a specific health-related question about a hazardous waste site. A health consultation is a written document. A series of health consultations may be written on one site.
- **Health education** provides information and training to communities and its medical professionals about ways to assess, control, or prevent exposure to hazardous substances. Activities include partnering with communities through public meetings, public availability sessions, developing site-specific fact sheets and resource guides.
- **Health studies** help determine whether exposure to hazardous substances can lead to increased risk of various health problems, such as cancer, leukemia, multiple sclerosis, asthma, and other illnesses. The HAP works with ATSDR in conducting health studies.
- **Technical assistance** is provided upon request, usually to other state and federal agencies.

Serving Communities

Exposure to contaminated well water was reduced at the Watson Johnson Landfill Site in Bucks County. HAP staff prepared a public health assessment on the site and met with residents to discuss their personal health concerns regarding past exposure to private well water contaminated with arsenic and volatile organic compounds (VOCs). HAP staff provided guidance on how to reduce exposure to contaminants in their well water. As recommended in the public health assessment, the EPA provided water treatment units to the homes whose wells are impacted by the landfill and is negotiating with local authorities to provide public water to the impacted neighborhood.

Community health concerns were addressed at the S.S. Fisher Steel Site in Lancaster County. Residents wanted to know: Is the landfill affecting private well water? Is the well water safe to drink? And were there serious diseases—especially multiple sclerosis and some cancers—related to the landfill? A health consultation was prepared and concluded that the landfill posed no apparent public health hazard to the community; that nitrate, a chemical common to farming communities and this area, was a concern in some of the wells and that water should not be used for infants less than six months of age; and recommended additional residential well samples be collected from homes downgradient of the landfill.

Indoor air quality was evaluated at homes near the Coaldale MGP Site in Carbon County. A health consultation concluded that children and adults living in the homes are not expected to have any harmful health effects from exposure to VOCs. Because many common household products contain VOCs, information was provided to residents on the proper use, storage, and disposal of household products.

The HAP collaborated with a Berks County community where past lead smelter and recycling operations resulted in lead contaminated soils. The following **health education** activities were conducted to increase lead poisoning awareness, prevention, and screening of high risk individuals:

- visits were conducted with local family practice physicians and pediatricians.
- free blood lead screenings were offered at a local community event and Safety Day.
- an update on lead poisoning was provided to pediatricians at a local hospital.
- a community and health professional task force was formed to provide advice and support for lead poisoning prevention activities.

Dr. Keith Burkhart, Medical Toxicologist, provided **health professional education** to physicians at the Hazleton General Hospital and Medical Center who serve residents concerned about the Valmont TCE site in Luzerne County. The presentation reviewed the toxicology of the solvent trichloroethylene, also known as TCE, and the contamination present at the Valmont TCE Superfund site. Also, residents living near the Valmont TCE site were offered the opportunity to have Dr. Burkhart provide medical consultation to their private physicians.

A **training session** was provided to maternal child health program nurse consultants entitled: ***Environmental Health: A Nursing Perspective***. The purpose of the program was to assist the nurses in their work to identify, evaluate, and communicate messages relating to environmental exposures.

Fact sheets were distributed to residents living close to the Langner Enterprises Site in Mercer County to increase awareness about physical and potential chemical hazards on the site. A fact sheet on suspected former lead smelter sites was distributed with Pennsylvania's Lead Elimination Plan for 2010. The fact sheet maps 53 suspected former lead smelter foundries that operated in the Commonwealth primarily before 1964. Air deposition from the former operations may have contaminated the soil or dust in surrounding neighborhoods and thereby present a potential current public health risk for childhood lead poisoning. The purpose of the fact sheet is to assist physicians in identifying children in their practice who may be at risk for elevated blood lead levels because they live near a former lead smelter site. Air deposition of lead from former smelter operations may be a health concern to nearby neighborhoods; either independently or more likely as an additive contributor to other common sources of lead in the home or environment. Since most facilities operated decades ago, residents living nearby may not be aware of a potential health risk.



For More Information:

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This fact sheet was supported by funds from the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act trust fund through a cooperative agreement with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.