



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: Board of Supervisors - Fifth District

Subject: Development of Health in All Policies Approach to Policy Evaluation and its Inclusion in the Strategic Plan

Meeting Date: February 25, 2025

Formal Title: Consider directing staff of the Health Services Agency and County Administrative Office to return on or before May 20, 2025, with best practice research and recommendations for how to embed a Health in All Policies framework into the evaluation of all proposed County policies and the 2026-2032 Strategic Plan

Recommended Actions

Direct staff of the Health Services Agency and County Administrative Office to return on or before May 20, 2025, with best practice research and recommendations for how to embed a Health in All Policies framework, or a similar framework, into the evaluation of all proposed County policies, and how this approach to achieving community well-being could be incorporated into the 2026-2032 Strategic Plan and other coordinating County plans.

Executive Summary

Direct staff of the Health Services Agency and County Administrative Office to return on or before May 20, 2025, with best practice research and recommendations for how to embed a Health in All Policies framework, or a similar framework, into the evaluation of all proposed County policies, and how this approach to achieving community well-being could be incorporated into the 2026-2032 Strategic Plan and other coordinating County plans.

Discussion

What is Health in All Policies?

Health in All Policies is a collaborative approach to improving the health of all people by incorporating health considerations into decision-making across different sectors and policy areas. The goal of Health in All Policies is to ensure that all decision-makers are informed about the health consequences of a proposed policy during its development period.^[1] The need for this type of whole-government approach is founded on the recognition that the social, physical, and economic conditions and environments in which a person lives greatly affect their longevity and well-being.

Social Determinants of Health

Many factors in a person's life affect their health. While variables like genetics, biology, and individual behavior certainly play a role, "social determinants of health" have been found to be just as relevant to health outcomes.

^[1] Washington, DC and Oakland, CA: American Public Health Association and Public Health Institute. Rudolph, L., Caplan, J., Ben-Moshe, K., & Dillon, L. (2013). *Health in All Policies: A Guide for State and Local Governments*.

These social determinants include socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental conditions such as the quality of food and water available; educational and professional opportunity; living and working conditions; and access to housing, transportation, and healthcare services – among other things. Consequentially, when decision-makers create policies that affect these social determinants, the health implications should be carefully considered.

A Systemic Approach to Addressing Health

Social determinants of health are the key drivers of health outcomes and outcome disparities “that are the result of systemic, avoidable, and unjust social and economic policies and practices that create barriers to opportunity.”^[2] The economy and the environment are particularly relevant variables to the goal of promoting uniform health outcomes.

Poverty is a leading factor in one’s ability to lead a healthy lifestyle. One’s economic situation can affect everything from access to food, safe housing and places to exercise, to educational and professional opportunities. Illness and injury negatively affect not only individual productivity, but also that of the family members and friends who perform care-taking duties. Rising costs of healthcare are not only in detriment to the consumers, but also diminish the resources the government can dedicate to other critical areas. Thus, systemically promoting health through public policies that aim to keep people healthy benefits everyone in the long run.

Santa Cruz County residents understand that environmental sustainability is closely tied to overall well-being. Environmental factors not only pose direct risks to health, such as natural disasters, but also impact essential systems like food, water, air quality, and housing. Because of this, sustainability considerations are a key part of evaluating the potential health impacts of policies and projects.

Even seemingly routine projects can have significant consequences for community resilience and disaster preparedness. Decisions about infrastructure maintenance can influence emergency response times and evacuation routes. Investments in public facilities can determine whether residents have access to safe, healthy spaces during environmental hazards. Ensuring that sustainability and health are integrated into decision-making helps build a more resilient and equitable community.

Similarly, many policy decisions affect the ability to mitigate human impacts on our environment and work towards sustainability goals. For example, reliable access to communications networks is not only important during a crisis, but also permits many people to work remotely and socialize from home, reducing the carbon emissions associated with travel and transportation infrastructure while combatting feelings of isolation and the digital divide in youth and the elderly alike. Promoting and investing in efficient water infrastructure helps avoid overtaxing our natural resources and ensures that people have the clean water they need to be healthy.

^[2] Virginia Department of Health. (2016, September). *What is health inequity?* www.vdh.virginia.gov/health-equity/unnatural-causes-is-inequality-making-us-sick/what-is-health-inequity/ (Accessed February 14, 2025)

Accordingly, prioritizing health is an essential part of the conversation both when trying to create systems that are resilient in the face of changing environmental tendencies, and when working to mitigate human impacts on the environment.

Whether the issue at hand is transportation infrastructure, broadband access, or funding libraries, every policy will have socioeconomic consequences, and thus health impacts. The Health in All Policies approach seeks to institutionalize considerations of health into the decision-making process to ensure that policy consequences are properly evaluated, weighed, and discussed by policymakers and stakeholders before being adopted.

Making Health Impacts Explicit in the Public Discussion About Policy

Stakeholder engagement is key to the success of any public policy. However, when health impacts of proposed decisions are left implicit, they are often overlooked during public debate. To ensure that stakeholders have an opportunity to consider, understand, and respond to all the potential consequences of policy proposals, the health ramifications of these should be made explicit.

Opportunity for Efficiency and Mutual Benefits

Intersectoral collaborations help to promote efficiency by encouraging discussion on how agencies can share resources and identify redundancies. Additionally, prioritizing health in all decision-making can help creatively navigate budget constraints by sharing health-relevant information to better target and address health-related concerns. But most importantly, the Health in All Policies approach is likely to deliver better results for all involved. This is because, just as the policies of most departments will have an impact on health, better health outcomes typically also support the achievement of the goals of other departments. All sectors benefit when people are healthy, because healthier people tend to be happier, more productive, and less likely to engage in risk behaviors that might eventually require additional public resources to address.

Strategic Planning

The Santa Cruz County Strategic Plan serves as a roadmap for achieving community goals through various programs and services. The County is currently in the process of updating this guiding framework, including community indicators, to be implemented in 2026-2032. It is therefore timely to consider the possibility of incorporating a health-centric lens in the refreshed Strategic Plan to ensure that future decision-making does not overlook important health impacts or opportunities. Since the next report on the Strategic Plan refresh is anticipated to come before the Board this summer, recommendations on incorporating a Health in All Policies approach should be presented to the Board prior to that.

As part of the Strategic Plan, the County of Santa Cruz has operationalized its objectives, creating the Climate Action and Adaptation Plan (CAAP), the Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), and the Master Plan on Aging. Staff should also

review and recommend how a Health in All Policies framework, or a similar framework, could be incorporated into these plans moving forward.

Other Jurisdictions

Other jurisdictions across the state, including the City of Santa Cruz, have implemented a Health in All Policies framework. Researching these jurisdictions and identifying best practices would help inform the County's implementation of this approach.

Conclusion

The Health in All Policies approach institutionalizes health considerations into the development and implementation of policies, programs, and services of traditionally non-health related government departments. It ensures that any policy's health impacts are an explicit part of the conversation with stakeholders, and it promotes the strategic and efficient use of resources among collaborative departments. It is worth asking staff to explore and recommend how Health in All Policies, or a similar framework, could be implemented as a standard step in future policymaking, and how it could be embedded into the County's 2026-2032 Strategic Plan and other coordinating plans.

The Board anticipates that staff's report would include, but not be limited to, recommendations on how this approach could be procedurally operationalized and what resources would be necessary to do so. The Board would also like staff to study how other jurisdictions have successfully implemented a Health in All Policies framework, and identify what practices are imitable in the County of Santa Cruz.

The County Administrative Office is conducting a foundational review of achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from the 2018-2024 Strategic Plan. This review will help design outreach strategies and tools for the Strategic Plan refresh, including community and staff engagement that will be planned this summer and take place this fall. Staff of the County Administrative Office and Health Services Agency are being asked to return by May 20, 2025, with best practice research and recommendations to embed Health in All Policies, or a similar framework, in the refresh.

Financial Impact

There is no financial impact from the recommended action.

Strategic Initiatives

Operational Plan - Comprehensive Health & Safety

Operational Plan – Sustainable Environment

Submitted By:

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Recommended By:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Administrative Officer

Artificial Intelligence Acknowledgment:

Artificial Intelligence (AI) did not significantly contribute to the development of this agenda item.