

Environmental Health Position Paper



**WA Primary
Health Alliance**
Better health, together

phn

PERTH NORTH, PERTH SOUTH,
COUNTRY WA

An Australian Government Initiative

wapha.org.au

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1. Key Messages

- Environmental health involves those aspects of public health concerned with the factors, circumstances, and conditions in the environment or surroundings of humans that can exert an influence on health and well-being [1].
- In Western Australia, overall responsibility for maintaining and funding environmental health programs rests with state and local government agencies (see Appendix A).
- Those most disadvantaged are more likely to experience greatest environmental health [2] challenges including poor living conditions.
- WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) acknowledges that poor living conditions are likely to be caused by a range of factors including the social determinants of health and can significantly impact on social, emotional, and physical wellbeing [3],[4].
- WAPHA confirms that responding effectively to the social determinants of health [5], [6], is a shared responsibility requiring long term multi-agency strategies and is beyond the scope of WAPHA to influence as a sole agency.
- As stated, in the WA Public Health Plan 2019-2024, improving the social determinants of health... “requires collaborative action by a variety of sectors to drive improvements to the health and wellbeing of the WA population, be it at a state-wide or local community level” [7] .
- WAPHA, and all other health agencies, have a current and future role in responding to the impact on health from extreme climate events and the associated environmental risks emerging from a warming planet, including pandemics, heatwaves, flooding, and bushfires [8].

2. Background

WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) is funded by the Australian Government [9] with a mandate to:

- commission health services to meet the needs of people in their regions and address gaps in primary health care.
- work closely with general practitioners (GPs) and other health professionals to build the capacity of the health workforce to deliver high-quality care.
- integrate health services at the local level to create a better experience for people, encourage better use of health resources, and eliminate service duplication.

WAPHA has a limited amount of funding to address a wide range of primary healthcare priorities.

WAPHA's Strategic Plan 2020-2023 [10] articulates WAPHA's role in leveraging our strategic partnerships, empowering people and communities and promoting and prioritising an integrated health system.

This includes designing and commissioning in a way that fosters connections between health service providers to address barriers to healthcare access.

3. What are we required to do?

Primary Health Networks (PHNs) have seven health priority areas for action including Population Health [11].

The definition of Population Health according to the WAPHA lexicon is:

...an approach to health that aims to improve the health of the entire population and to reduce health inequities among population groups. In order to reach these objectives, it looks at and acts upon the broad range of factors and interrelated conditions that have a strong influence on our health [12].

Environmental health conditions can impact significantly on specific population groups through the incidence of diseases such as rheumatic heart disease, trachoma, otitis media and post streptococcal glomerulonephritis [13].

Poor air quality, including dust spores from hazardous materials such as moulds, asbestos and silica can lead to chronic asthma, obstructive airways disease and asbestosis.

Stagnant water can result in a range of mosquito borne diseases. State and local governments have a shared role in ensuring high environmental health standards are maintained to minimise the burden of disease and premature death arising from environmental exposures and other environmental health impacts [14].

WAPHA has not had a role in the delivery of environmental health services and programs to date. WAPHA can, and does, however, facilitate and support the role of primary care in planning and responding to environmental emergencies by partnering with and supporting local communities, service providers, GPs, and other primary health care providers [15].

To ensure WAPHA's effective and contemporary governance, it is important that Board members are regularly informed of the environmental health issues that impact the work of WAPHA. WAPHA's Strategy and Policy team will provide regular updates to the Board highlighting emerging issues, opportunities and challenges in the area of environmental health that relate to WAPHA's scope of activity.

PHNs also contribute to Closing the Gap [16] and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people health initiatives, resulting in improved emotional, social, and physical wellbeing. It should be noted that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the definition of 'good health' involves 'more than the absence of disease or illness; it is a holistic concept that includes physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual wellbeing, for both the individual and the community' [17].

4. What are our environmental health priorities and actions?

While WAPHA does not directly fund environmental health service delivery, there are key roles that WAPHA plays which can contribute to a positive impact on primary healthcare services such as:

- system advocacy, coordination, and integration;
- regional planning and commissioning;
- primary care education, training, and workforce development; and
- health system transformation and reform to focus on a holistic response to health priorities including the impact of living conditions on health and well-being [18],[19], [20].

Supporting primary care providers and their clients to access basic community services such as housing, clean and drinkable water and food security can have an impact beyond primary care and lead to significant improvements in the health status of the individual, their families, and communities.

The Review of the Western Australian Aboriginal Environmental Health Program (March 2022) reinforced the need for more formalised and targeted intersectoral action and high-level system wide advocacy to improve Aboriginal Health and wellbeing. This equally applies to other community members also experiencing adverse living conditions.

5.0 WAPHA's role in environmental health

5.1 Provide primary care support to practitioners to deliver person centred holistic care:

- Use our relationships and communication channels, such as our GP, Practice and Service Provider Connect newsletters, to communicate challenges and opportunities to consider environmental health as a key social determinant of health. This also includes providing education and support to help services adapt and respond to the changing physical environment.

5.2 Build capacity of the primary health care workforce:

- Progress communities of practice such as the Integrated Team Care Program where there are opportunities to share learnings on a holistic approach to health care.
- Increase awareness of the impact of environment on health and wellbeing, including cultural implications and actions and resources that can support primary health care including referral pathways and community services available, through directories such as MAPPA and My Community Directory.
- Continue to develop the use of HealthPathways WA to build partnerships, link existing resources and services, and develop new health pathways that acknowledge environmental health as a key component of holistic health and wellbeing. This may include information on how to refer clients to environmental health services.

5.3 Advocacy with peak bodies and partners to acknowledge and promote action on addressing the environmental health causes of chronic disease such as asthma and COPD caused by adverse weather conditions, rheumatic heart disease, skin infections, kidney disease and exacerbation of diabetes complication

- Continue to participate and partner with Health Service Providers (HSPs) in the WAPHA/HSP Partnership Protocols, raising environmental health as a key factor for interagency advocacy and collaboration where appropriate.
- Continue to partner with WAPHA/Aboriginal Health Council of WA [21] via the Statement of Collaborative Intent to advocate for an increased focus and funding in Aboriginal environmental health initiatives and training where appropriate.

- Support regional primary health collaboratives/collectives to identify local needs and priorities for improving health outcomes and equity in provision of health service.
- Support Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services with information, advocacy, care coordination (integrated Team Care Program), training opportunities and access to primary care providers to address chronic conditions caused or exacerbated by poor living conditions.

5.4 Support development of positive and effective collaborative working relationships and multidisciplinary care focused on all aspects of person centred, value based primary health care:

- Continue to fund care navigation that takes a holistic view of the person and their environment; assist with building health and digital literacy; support care in the community preventing potential hospitalisations and linkages to essential service outside the health system to address the social determinants of health and improve health for those most in need.
- Promote the participation of local communities in codesign and delivery of place-based services key to addressing any identified environmental health challenges.
- Support local government to improve living conditions and other community concerns such as access to clean water and food security, through advocacy, collaboration (Age Friendly Strategies, Compassionate Communities), participating in joint activities locally, developing integrated health care precincts as well as partnering in general health and digital literacy [22],[23] local library and social connection activities,[24] leading to increased access to local health, social and community programs and services available.

6. What is out of scope?

While WAPHA recognises that climate change is an ever-increasing threat to human and environmental health and well-being, articulating a WAPHA-based response to climate change is out of scope for this position paper. WAPHA's responsibility and opportunity to respond to the impacts of climate change in collaboration with our stakeholders will be considered in a future position statement.

Direct funding of environmental health officers is not in scope for WAPHA based on an understanding that responsibility for managing environmental health resources falls under the jurisdiction of state and local governments, in partnership with other key service agencies such as Aboriginal Community Controlled Services. [25]

Appendix A: Roles and Responsibilities for Environmental Health

Agency & location	Roles and Responsibilities	Key Strategies/ Legislation
<p>WA Department of Health</p> <p>Perth WA</p>	<p>Administers several Acts of Parliament covering issues such as air quality, asbestosis management, pesticides, lead poisoning, insect pests, sewerage, tobacco, food, fluoride, water supply and aquatic facilities. Their strategic plan identifies improved EH conditions for remote Aboriginal communities, as well as safe public events, homes, and public buildings.</p> <p>The EH Directorate (EHD) of the WA Department of Health, Public and Aboriginal Health Division, is the government sector with responsibility for maintaining public and EH standards across WA. Their role is to ensure appropriate management strategies, such as legislation, guidelines, surveillance, monitoring, and public education, are in place to prevent disease, illness, injury, disability, and premature death arising from environmental exposures and other EH impacts.</p> <p>They work closely with the local government EH workforce who deliver a broad range of compliance, enforcement, and educational activities to ensure a high standard of EH is maintained at a local district level[26].</p>	<p><u>State Public Health Plan 2019-2024</u></p> <p><u>WA Public Health Act 2016</u></p>
<p>Local governments</p> <p>Statewide</p>	<p>Local governments play a significant role under the Public Health Act 2016 and others in WA. They are key partners with the State Government, joint-regulators, and duty holders in the environment protection framework.</p> <p>Councils regulate several key environmental and human health issues using their powers under the Act. They also act as land managers and provide key services to the community, such as waste collection and landfill management.</p> <p>Local government EH services work closely with State EH officers and the Department of Environment Regulation to uphold and advance good environmental practices and human health. [27]</p>	<p><u>WA Public Health Act 2016</u></p>
<p>Local Public Health Services</p> <p>Statewide</p>	<p>The Population/Public Health Unit from the relevant Health Service Provider; North, South or East Metropolitan Health Service, the WA Country Health Services or the Child and Adolescent Health Services, can provide a level of guidance to local governments with the planning process and response to local public health EH needs and emergencies, developing local government public health plans, provide training and education to Aboriginal EH Officers, health promotion and secondary risk factors. Public health services also detect and treat environmental diseases such as Ross River Fever, food poisoning and water borne infections in collaboration with agencies such as PathWest. In some regions there may specific EH teams that action referrals to address hazards (Wyndham, East Kimberley).</p>	<p><u>State Public Health Plan 2019-2024</u></p>

Appendix A: Roles and Responsibilities for Environmental Health cont.

Agency & location	Roles and Responsibilities	Key Strategies/ Legislation
<p>Primary Health Networks (PHN)</p> <p>Perth North, Perth South, Country WA</p>	<p>PHNs aim to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of medical services, particularly for patients at risk of poor health outcomes. PHNs determine where to direct their activities and resources because of the needs assessment of their region.</p> <p>Activities conducted by PHNs address the needs of people in their local region, including an equity focus.</p> <p>PHNs may also support primary care services, Health Service Providers, and local governments to respond to local public health emergencies such as COVID-19, salmonella, and norovirus outbreaks in aged care facilities</p>	<p><u>PHN Performance and Quality Framework 2018</u></p>
<p>Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHSs)</p> <p>Statewide</p>	<p>ACCHSs play a key role in supporting EH measures in partnerships with state and local governments particularly in remote Aboriginal communities. This includes ensuring that services provided are culturally safe and responsive in meeting local needs [28].</p> <p>It is a recommendation of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021-2023 to grow and support the local workforce.</p>	<p><u>National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2023-2031</u></p>
<p>PathWest and other diagnostic and surveillance agencies</p>	<p>Perform statewide public health microbiology testing and monitoring of environmental pathogens including infectious, food and water borne disease to identify outbreaks, hazards and determine safe environments.</p>	<p><u>State Public Health Plan 2019-2024</u></p> <p><u>WA Public Health Act 2016</u></p>

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Acknowledgement

WA Primary Health Alliance acknowledges and pays respect to the Traditional Owners and Elders of this country and recognises the significant importance of their cultural heritage, values and beliefs and how these contribute to the positive health and wellbeing of the whole community.

Disclaimer

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