

Study shows most health department directors see climate change as looming health threat

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A new study from George Mason University reveals that while a majority of U.S. health department directors believe their city or county will have serious public health problems as a result of climate change within the next 20 years, very few of them have planned or implemented activities to detect, prevent or adapt to these health threats.

Edward Maibach, professor and director of the Center for Climate Change Communication and lead author of the study, wanted to understand how directors of local public health departments view, and are responding to, climate change as a public health issue.

"Relatively few Americans, businesses and policymakers are aware of the consequences that climate change is likely to have on the health of our communities, families and children," says Maibach. "Our research shows that most, if not all, local health departments are going to require assistance in making climate change adaptation and prevention a priority and must take action now to ensure climate change does not become an increasing global threat."

The study "Climate Change and Local Public Health in the United States: Preparedness, Programs and Perceptions of Local Public Health Department Directors," which will be published this week in the journal Public Library of Science ONE, reveals that the majority of health department directors believed that threats such as heat waves or heat-

related illnesses, reduced air quality and reduced water quality or quantity were most likely to become more common or severe as a result of climate change.

The study also suggests that several key factors may contribute to local health departments' lack of preparedness. Most survey respondents felt that the personnel in their health department – and other key stakeholders in their community – had a lack of knowledge about climate change, that little help was currently available from state and federal public health officials, and that they needed additional funding, staff and staff training to respond effectively to climate change.

"The reason why so many Americans view climate change as a threat to other species rather than as a threat to people may be in part because health professionals have been largely silent on the issue," says Maibach. "By using the opportunities available to them, public health and health care professionals can educate people on the threats of climate change to their health and wellbeing."

Source: George Mason University

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