



Environmental Justice

for Local Governments

What is Environmental Justice?

The concept behind the term “environmental justice” is that all people – regardless of their race, color, national origin or income – are able to enjoy equally high levels of environmental protection and quality of life.

What is the history of EJ?

The Environmental Justice (EJ) movement began as a way to address concerns about disproportionate environmental burdens in poor, minority communities. EJ as a social movement has grown rapidly since the Warren County Landfill protests of the early 1980’s. In the case of the Warren County controversy arose in 1982 when the State of North Carolina designated space for a landfill in Warren County, a community that was black, poor, rural and politically powerless. The landfill was designated as a place to dump PCB’s -a toxic chemical.

What is an example of EJ?

The EPA cites the Love Canal disaster in Niagara Falls, New York, as “one of the most appalling environmental tragedies in American history.” The canal, a former dumping site for municipal and industrial chemical waste, was transformed into a neighborhood with schools and low-income housing by the city. In the following years, groundwater contamination from the former landfill impacted the health of more than 6,000 residents. Early surveys conducted by residents illustrated that 56 percent of the children born in the neighborhood had birth defects such as deformed teeth, anemia, ADHD and auto immune diseases, while mothers had a 300 percent jump in miscarriages.

Why is EJ important to County Governments?

All 23 counties and Baltimore City, have the responsibility of offering environmental protection and economic development to their citizens and constituents. This takes into account public health, ecological health, and community sustainability, development and participation. Many local jurisdictions in Maryland have the authority to plan and zone land for specific uses, making these governments responsible for the resulting land use patterns.

Which communities are most vulnerable to EJ issues?

Low-income and minority communities are most vulnerable to EJ issues. Often these communities do not have an organized community group that can serve as a point of contact. As a result, these communities may house a disproportionate amount of polluting facilities putting residents at a much higher risk for health problems from environmental exposures. Any community can be subject to the effects of EJ issues if their citizens are not informed and able to be involved in the local land use decision-making process.

County Government involvement in implementing EJ in Maryland

Environmental Justice (EJ) at MDE parallels the agency's mission and emphasizes quality of life, economic development, and environmental protection improvements in all communities, particularly those far removed in decision-making. The EJ policies at MDE are working to improve the quality of life in communities through a vision of partnerships and collaborations. In order to fulfill this goal, county governments must be committed to:

Identifying community goals and fostering internal coordination.

- Integrate and incorporate EJ activities into county operations and land use decision-making.
- Ensure participation in policy formulation by all sectors of the community by providing opportunities for input that match each sector's ability to participate.

Fostering intergovernmental coordination.

- Establish cooperative relationships on joint projects with federal and state governments by streamlining objectives, goals and implementation plans.
- Improve communication between federal and state governments, as well as the private sector, local neighborhoods and other stakeholders.
- Undertake jurisdiction-wide EJ forums to discuss concerns and solutions.
- Efficiently build a network of people who are knowledgeable about the issues of concern to share expertise and advance the EJ agenda in Maryland. This includes reaching out to local businesses, legislators, planning and community organizations and the academic community.
- Strengthen government infrastructure at local levels to support marginalized communities.
- Promote and implement MDE's Environmental Benefit Districts program, which was designed as a means to concentrate state resources to enhance the quality of life in communities through environmental protection and business development.

Offering solutions.

- Optimize resources. Solutions could appear in the form of increased public participation and education, public-private partnerships, innovative outreach advertising (social media, newspapers, press releases, outdoor signs) and strategic enforcement.

Maryland Environmental Justice Resources

CEJSC: The Commission of Environmental Justice and Sustainable Communities is tasked with advising State government agencies on environmental justice and analyzing the effectiveness of State and local government laws and policies to address issues of environmental justice and sustainable communities.

MDE: The Maryland Department of Environment focuses on encouraging environmental protection and economic development in Maryland that takes into account public and ecological health, sustainability issues, and community participation.

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