

How Mississippi Prioritizes Environmental Justice During Disaster Response

[Environmental justice](#) is defined as all people enjoying the same degree of access and protection from environmental and health hazards. This happens by intentionally involving all people—regardless of race, color, national origin, or income—while developing, implementing, and enforcing environmental laws and policies. The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) incorporates environmental justice principles into their disaster response and emergency preparedness efforts.

To support these endeavors, MSDH allocates funding through the Preventative Health and Health Services [Block Grant](#), which is appropriated to the Office of Environmental Health.

MSDH's Preventative Health and Health Services Block Grant enables integration of environmental justice considerations into MSDH's annual workplan, and it promotes equity in addressing environmental health challenges.

Mississippi's environmental justice work has been community-based and equity-driven; this approach was especially evident in the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, the [Office of Health Equity](#) was tasked with fostering partnerships to address the pandemic's disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minority populations. MSDH began education initiatives aimed at disseminating critical information and prevention strategies to communities. In addition to conducting direct outreach, MSDH established cross-sector partnerships to improve access to COVID-19 tests. MSDH worked closely with the National Guard and several community-based organizations to establish testing sites in isolated and historically under-served neighborhoods.

MSDH also created communication channels with faith-based organizations to quickly share information and ensure communities received timely updates and guidance throughout the pandemic. These coordinated efforts continue to support marginalized communities in response to natural disasters.

Partnerships

In the wake of the devastating tornados that struck Rolling Fork, Silver City, and Amory in 2023, MSDH's existing partnerships emerged as a critical aspect of disaster response and recovery. The [Division of Strategic Planning and Response](#) played a pivotal role in coordinating essential services for impacted community members by issuing critical documents (e.g., birth certificates, social security cards) and offering TB tests and TDAP vaccines. In addition to MSDH's existing community-based partners, the Office of Health Equity also established cross-sector relationships with local officials, city mayors, office administrators, community leaders, national

NGOs, Red Cross and Head Start programs, as well as other state and local agencies to support impacted communities.

Health Equity

Mississippi's multi-agency approach to disaster response has promoted a comprehensive range of administrative and social services to the communities affected by tornadoes. Following the integration of the Office of Health Equity into MSDH's overall response, the health agency enhanced community-based partnerships and communication efforts. These partnerships enhanced the agency's response and allowed for direct community engagement through townhall discussions and community events. These forums utilized interpreters and culturally relevant communications, which led to increased uptake of available services. As part of this effort, staff also receive cultural competency and implicit bias training.

MSDH also collaborates with their State Department of Environmental Quality, EPA, and the U.S. Department of Justice to address the pressing issue of [sewage system repairs in communities where under-treated sewage seeps into homes, streets, and waterways](#).

These efforts underscore the state's commitment to improve living conditions and health in historically marginalized and under-resourced communities.

Other ongoing initiatives, such as [water fluoridation efforts](#), also maintain a strong emphasis on community involvement and education through early care and education facilities. These collective efforts highlight the importance of partnerships and cross-sector collaboration in responding to disasters and promoting health equity within the impacted communities.

Challenges

The team faced two significant challenges integrating environmental justice and health equity into their disaster response efforts. Many team members were accustomed to working behind desks and, as such, were not in the field to engage with community partners. Recognizing this, MSDH prioritized building relationships and trust in communities across the state—a critical step to communicating effectively during disaster response.

Language barriers were significant as a substantial portion of the population primarily spoke languages other than English, such as Spanish or Vietnamese. Since disseminating information in accessible language is crucial to ensuring communities' health and well-being, MSDH established a [Language Access Plan](#) to improve access to services to people with limited English proficiency. During response efforts, the Office of Health Equity was responsible for providing translation and transcription services for all response-related materials, which enabled the health department to ensure that essential information was translated into both Spanish and Vietnamese. This approach not only bridged language gaps but played a vital role in building trust within these communities for those seeking assistance in the aftermath of natural disasters, including partners directly sharing important information.

Successful Strategies for Integrating Environmental Justice

A key strategy that has proven effective in these collaborations is the agency's active involvement in community forums held in the affected areas, which helps ensure the delivery of essential services and support to the impacted communities.

One crucial element of MSDH's success in integrating environmental justice is leadership buy-in and support for health equity, embodied by Mississippi's state health officials. When in office, Thomas Dobbs, MD, MPH, provided executive level support to address equity and access issues during a crucial time by bridging communications and service gaps in the agency's response. MSDH's current Director—Daniel Edney, MD, MPH—continues to champion for addressing health disparities and integrating health equity into the response framework.

Thanks to this support, the Office of Health Equity was formally designated a role in the Incident Command Structure to provide guidance for effective community outreach and partnership-building. In that capacity, the Office of Health Equity hosts periodic community forums to share resources, listen to community needs, and strategize to address barriers during future response efforts. Committed MSDH leadership demonstrates a genuine dedication to environmental justice while fostering a deep sense of collaboration with the communities that the agency aims to serve.

MSDH promotes health equity and resilience by engaging directly with communities and building partnerships to address community needs during disaster response. Cross-sector partnerships, such as those with local governments, NGOs, and federal agencies, enhance the reach and effectiveness of response efforts through coordination and integration of health equity considerations. Proactive support from health agency leaders also provides the vision and framework to create a sustained commitment to health equity and environmental justice.

This product was supported by Cooperative Agreement Number OT18-1802 funded by the National Center for Environmental Health at CDC. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.