

Risk Communication: “Town Meeting” Class Presentations

Overview and Goals: In groups of 4 or 5, students will adopt the roles of members of a team of local Health Department personnel (or other local officials) who are addressing a community group about an environmental health issue in the community. The remainder of the class will assume the role of the community group. Through this process, students are expected to demonstrate good risk communication skills in a public meeting environment. Through preparation of their presentation, students will become familiar with environmental health issues, legislation and regulations related to environmental health, and issues and expectations regarding community right to know and environmental justice.

Process:

1. *Identify Issue*

Each group of students should scan recent issues of a local newspaper to identify an environmental health concern (or a potential concern). Preferably, each group will review newspapers from different locations. Potential environmental health issues include (but are not limited to): air pollution, water pollution, waste/toxic waste, industrial discharge (to air, water or ground), or agricultural pollution.

2. *Determine Roles and Plan Presentation*

Based upon the chosen issue, each group will decide upon the composition of the team that will address the town meeting. Each student will adopt the role of a member of this team for the purposes of developing and presenting a portion of the presentation, and responding to questions and comments from the community (i.e., the remainder of the class). This team should be made up of members of the state or local health department, or other local officials as appropriate. For ideas for titles of personnel, see www.state.xx.us (xx = state abbreviation) for links to the state health department and local counties or www.epa.gov → “Where You Live” for links to state environmental agencies.

Once your team has been developed, plan a 15-20 minute presentation that will address the following:

- What are the potential health effects related to your identified area of concern? This discussion should incorporate the basic concepts of risk assessment.
- What federal, state and local laws and regulations address the issues? Based on these laws and regulations, how is your agency planning to respond to the community’s concerns?

- Based on knowledge of laws and regulations regarding Community Right to Know and environmental justice, how are the agencies represented by your team going to address those issues?

Each member of the team should be responsible for developing a portion of the presentation and being prepared to answer questions from the community.

A required reading for development of these presentations is “Risk Communication Materials” on the ATSDR (Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry) website: www.atsdr.cdc.gov (under “Environmental Health Education”). Pay special attention to:

- *Seven Cardinal Rules*
- *Interacting with the community (Think carefully about how you are going to relate to, and involve the community during your presentation.)*
- *Avoiding pitfalls*
- *Presenting Information at Public Meetings (including answering questions and sample questions)*

Other references are listed at the end of these guidelines.

3. *Deliver Your Presentation*

Before delivering your presentation, distribute photocopies of the newspaper article that describes the concern your group is addressing. With the remainder of the class assuming the role of a group of concerned community members, deliver your presentation. The class (community members) should be prepared to ask questions and raise concerns, using the questions and comments in the “Sample Questions” section of the ATSDR materials cited above as a guide. This activity will require some creativity, but it is a very important part of this learning activity. It will be helpful if class members can really adopt the role of concerned community members (without “going overboard”!). *The total time for the presentation and comment period should be 30 minutes.*

4. *Evaluate Your Presentation*

After completion of the presentation and comment period, spend 10-15 minutes evaluating your experience by discussing the following questions:

- How did you *feel* when you were giving your presentation? How did you feel when you were answering questions and addressing concerns expressed by the community? What would you have liked to do differently?
- How did the “community members” feel about your presentation and responses to their concerns? What would have made the presentation more effective?

Resources

Overview of environmental health issues

- National Library of Medicine: www.sis.nlm.nih.gov → Toxicology and Environmental Health → MEDLINEplus: Poisoning, Toxicology and Environmental Health
- Healthy People 2010 resource: www.nlm.gov/partners → HP2010 Information Access Project → environmental health
- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): www.epa.gov

Risk Communication

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry: www.atsdr.cdc.gov (see “Environmental Health Education”)

State and Local Public Health and Environmental Agencies

- State websites (often have links to county websites): www.state.xx.us (xx = state abbreviation)
- Links to State environmental agencies: www.epa.gov → “Where You Live”

Specific chemicals:

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR): www.atsdr.cdc.gov (see “ToxFAQ’s” and “Toxicological Profiles”)
- National Library of Medicine – TOXNET: www.toxnet.nlm.nih.gov
- National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS): www.niehs.nih.gov → National Toxicology Program → Chemical Health and Safety Information)

Risk assessment:

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) – Integrated Risk Information System (IRIS): www.epa.gov/IRIS (see “Introduction”)
- National Library of Medicine – Toxicology Tutorial: www.sis.nlm.nih.gov

Laws and Regulations:

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): www.epa.gov → Laws and Regulations
- State websites: www.state.xx.us (xx = state abbreviation)

Community Right to Know:

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): www.epa.gov → Laws and Regulations → Emergency Planning and Community Right to Know Act

Environmental Justice:

- Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): www.epa.gov/oeca/main/ej
- Mississippi Delta Project: www.sis.nlm.nih.gov/Tox/ToxMiss → Module V

This material was developed at the Environmental Health Education Center of the University of Maryland School of Nursing. For more information, see envirn.umaryland.edu.