
MEMORANDUM

BRC-C 8-2021

Subject: Health Equity-Informed Planning Update

Date: June 17, 2021

To: Budget Review Committee of the Whole

From: Dr. Mustafa Hirji, Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting)

Background

The Health Equity-Informed Planning (HEIP) Project was approved as part of the 2019-2022 Regional Strategic Plan. It aims to embed health equity and consideration of the social determinants of health (SDOH) into Regional planning by addressing the unintended health impacts of decisions made in non-health sectors.

As a reminder, SDOH are the non-biological factors in our lives that determine 60% of health outcomes. These include our income, education, working and housing conditions, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, level of social supports, and more. We know these factors are not distributed equally across all people in society, and therefore not everyone has the same opportunity to achieve good health. Health equity is the state where these differences in the SDOH would be eliminated, so that only biological variation would then determine differences in our health outcomes.

Because the SDOH are affected by all policies in society, not just health policies, health equity can only be achieved by addressing policies in all sectors. Integrating considerations for health and health equity into planning processes within the Region supports Council Strategic Priority Two: Healthy and Vibrant Community.

The outcomes identified in the implementation plan include

- Increased access to health equity data and partnerships to drive decisions
- Increased consideration of health and health equity impacts in community and infrastructure design
- Greater organizational and public awareness of how the SDOH impact individual health outcomes

This will be accomplished through integrating Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) into planning processes for initiatives across the corporation with the aim for Niagara to become one of the 25 healthiest communities in Canada.

An HIA is a combination of procedures, methods and tools by which a policy, program or project may be judged as to its potential effects on population health. They are frequently used to assess work outside of the traditional health sector. Other municipalities in Canada, such as Toronto, Vancouver, and Quebec City, have also incorporated HIAs across their organizations.

Based on the timelines in the HEIP Project, we aim to incorporate HIAs into Regional planning processes by June 2022. This is also aligned with the budget planning bylaw “to establish social determinants of health as a consideration in program and budget decisions”.

Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Process at Niagara Region

The first step of the HIA process is to utilize a screening tool to identify the potential impact a project or initiative may have on various social determinants, with a rating capturing both negative and positive impact on a scale of -3 to 3. The cumulative score then identifies whether an HIA would be a worthwhile endeavour, and if so, which level (rapid, intermediate, comprehensive).

Following this, the HIA process works through a number of evidence-informed, standardized steps that work to identify health outcomes that stem from the project/initiative actions. The HIA process will be embedded within existing planning processes with support from the Project/Program Manager and internal and external stakeholders. HIAs collect and synthesize best available data as it relates to the actions and needs of the project/initiative. This data is then used to create recommendations that maximize positive health impacts and mitigate negative health impacts.

Status of 2021 HIA Pilot Project

A cross-sectional interdepartmental team of staff have been guiding the HIA pilot project through 2021 and meet monthly. The HIA project is focused on capital projects at this time, and is being supported with resources from Public Health. A position has been created for 2021 to complete the majority of the HIA planning work, with guidance from the Strategic Initiatives Coordinator in Public Health. There are two aspects to the pilot project:

- Aspect 1 of the pilot project is focused on the development of the HIA guidebook and suite of supplementary tools that complement existing departmental processes. Throughout the pilot, work is being done to understand how best to align the HIA work with existing processes in each department. Four projects were identified as being suitable for an HIA trial run after undergoing the screening process with support from Public Works and Planning & Development.
- Aspect 2 develops an HIA screening process along with the Capital Budget Process. The HIA screen will provide information to aid in the understanding of what SDOH the capital project may impact. In addition, to strengthen health considerations, SDOH have been included as one of the risk factors assessed by the corporate prioritization process for capital projects. In alignment with corporate/Council priorities and project risk factors such as SDOH, the corporate prioritization process optimizes the projects included in the 2022 Capital Budget.

Next Steps

The Next steps for each aspect are as follows:

Aspect 1

The anticipated deliverables (HIA guidebook and supplementary tools) of Aspect 1 of the pilot project will be presented in a report to Council through the committee structure. Four projects that have gone through the full pilot HIA process as a trial will also be presented with recommendations stemming from the HIAs: how best to amplify or mitigate the health outcomes of these projects. As part of the recommendations, there will be a better understanding of financial and resource needs to conduct HIAs. Best efforts are being made to leverage existing Regional processes to minimize additional needs.

Aspect 2

Aspect 2 of the pilot project will be integrated into the budget planning process for the 2022 Capital Budget. For the first year of implementation, projects will be assessed based on the following factors to determine a project's eligibility by filtering for

- Projects in design/planning phase that can address potential HIA recommendations
- Projects with large budget impacts

- Projects that provide a new/incremental level of service

Capital projects selected will be done in coordination with departments. Projects selected based on the filtering above will be put through the HIA screening tool as the first step of an HIA. The intent of the information provided from this initial screen is to aid in the understanding of what SDOH the capital project may impact. These SDOH summarized with their positive/negative impacts will accompany the 2022 Capital Budget report as an appendix. This appendix will flag potential health considerations for projects that will be discussed in depth through the completion of a full HIA. The recommendations from a full HIA will amplify positive health impacts of a project and mitigate negative health outcomes.

Supplementary Education Session

A more detailed presentation will be provided in late summer at PHSSC to further expand on the HEIP and HIA work.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

M. Mustafa Hirji, MD MPH FRCPC
Medical Officer of Health & Commissioner (Acting)
Public Health & Emergency Services