

Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative - Bay Area, California

Equitable, Community-Driven Responses to Climate Disasters

As a grant-funded partner in the Climate Change Health and Equity (CCHE) network, Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative (BARHII) has been working to provide practical strategies for senior local government equity leaders, public health departments, and community-based organizations (CBO) to advocate for and implement equitable responses to climate-driven disasters and build long-term resilience to climate disasters in equity communities. Their efforts align with the overall [CCHE Theory of Change](#) as part of Strategy 1.¹



Mission:

Advance health equity.

Through their CCHE-funded activities, BARHII has played a catalytic role in developing, establishing, and expanding the Equity Officer (EO) movement. Through the EO framework, BARHII effectively connected the equity movement to government investments for community resilience. During the COVID-19 pandemic, BARHII initially developed the Equity Officer (EO) model and through various webinars and outreach efforts, the EO model was adopted in the Bay Area and by the entire state of California soon after. BARHII's establishment and expansion of the EO model created a major structural change in local health departments throughout California and provided the necessary infrastructure in local health departments to meaningfully make a difference in communities. BARHII has seen immense growth and success with the EO model: over the course of the CCHE initiative, BARHII engaged approximately 390 equity leaders throughout California in robust trainings and convenings to expand the EO network and introduce the EO model to new regions. Additionally, BARHII has developed a four-part strategy to accelerate progress towards health equity which includes: 1) Convening government agency and EOs to share lessons learned and support network building, 2) Providing regional equity-related trainings in California, 3) Developing and implementing strategies specifically for improving Black health equity, and 4) Securing long-term funding for health equity-related efforts. Their work has been informed by public health departments, emergency management experts, and other partners engaged in emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic. See an overview of BARHII's key activities and intended impacts in their [CCHE theory of change \(slide 6, 2022\)](#), and described in more detail below.

Policies, Activities, and Initiatives Advanced During the CCHE Initiative

Built capacity of Equity Officers to integrate equitable recovery and long-term resilience strategies into their work. Through capacity building, BARHII has positioned EOs to bring equitable solutions to fruition and build long-term community resilience as *bureau-activists*. BARHII equipped EOs to serve as liaisons between communities and government in ways that foster genuine, authentic, and impactful near- and long-term change. For example, BARHII hosted a retreat for EOs with a focus on personal resilience to remind EOs the potential impact of their work. The retreat allowed EOs to reflect and recharge together and develop concrete leadership skills for change management.

Select Resources and Media

- [Strengthening a National Field of Practice for Climate, Health, and Equity: Learning What It Takes](#)
- [Local Health Departments and Subject Matter Experts Address Climate Change Readiness in California: Findings and Recommendations](#)

¹ This case story was developed by the Ross Strategic CCHE Evaluation and Learning team based on secondary data and key informant interviews.

BARHII's trainings are designed to connect EOs to resources that inform internal equity practices and investments across government agencies. The state of California invested \$30 million in the expansion of EOs and other equity-related positions across the state, which led to BARHII's development of a capacity building series to support EOs working in urban, rural, conservative, and progressive communities. The series included 25 events that reached over 300 equity staff in public health departments.

Through this work, BARHII engaged Equity and Results to conduct anti-racism training for EOs who were developing new programs and navigating complex systems within their agencies. The trainings were intended to support EOs with defining realistic goals, understanding their new roles, and navigating complex political moments in which some agencies were rolling back equity gains. BARHII also partnered with the Othering and Belonging Institute to provide specialized training to EOs on racial equity in light of state and national policies that constrained government agencies. One EO's experiences of working with community partners led to additional capacity building sessions with other EOs, too.

Advanced efforts to support government systems in addressing health inequities and building climate resilience across communities, while fostering collaboration between EOs, government stakeholders, and CBOs. BARHII developed numerous resources about the government's role in investments for climate resilience, including a report (forthcoming) with recommendations for ways in which local government can position themselves to support communities impacted by climate-driven disasters. BARHII conducted a training series in which roughly 390 people from California's public health departments participated and learned about targeted models for government investments in equity. Staff from public health departments in Nevada and Oregon were also engaged in these trainings and BARHII will expand their work outside of California to ensure that equity is prioritized at the national level.

BARHII has received feedback from public health leadership throughout the Bay Area about the importance of establishing EO positions, especially since there was an increasing need for a more equitable emergency response during the COVID-19 pandemic and climate disasters. BARHII supported the development and facilitation of a state-wide community of practice on climate. The community of practice engaged 40 to 50 staff from public health departments across California, creating a venue for BARHII to provide ongoing support and enhance the understanding of equity-focused resilience strategies among public health department staff.

Connected Equity Officers to new climate resources and increased their connections to BIPOC-led climate justice organizations. During the COVID-19 pandemic, EOs ensured that APRA funds were allocated towards communities that were most impacted. For example, an EO in Sonoma County shaped how \$100 million of funding for COVID-19 relief was allocated towards CBOs. Through this work, the county government recognized the need to engage with CBOs in periods of non-emergency and reduce barriers to collaboration between government agencies, CBOs, and residents.

Engaged stakeholders in understanding and adopting equity-focused resilience strategies. Ky-Nam Miller, an EO for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, co-produced a regional session for governmental leaders in the Bay Area on climate, health, and equity in December 2023. Additionally, Ky-Nam utilized BARHII's model for community engagement, described in [Farther Together on Climate Resilience](#), and was able to create long-term partnerships with community organizations focused on climate change. This eventually led to the establishment of a bench for regional work that receives multi-year contracts to support projects at the intersection of climate, health, and equity.

Shared lessons from efforts with national audiences to catalyze replication of successes and draw from promising practice. BARHII's Managing Director, Matt Vander Sluis, facilitated a session at the Governing for Race & Equity (GARE) California Convening on BARHII's EO model, which included on-stage interviews with EOs involved in public health and emergency management. Vander Sluis also facilitated a session at the annual conference of the County Health Executives Association of California (CHEAC) with two EOs on how public health can leverage the EO model to address health inequities related to public health emergencies and chronic disease. BARHII's Director of Collaborative Health Equity Practice, Anita Kumar, presented at the National Association of County and City Health Officers (NACCHO) annual convening about the EO model.

Incubated the national infrastructure to create a larger ecosystem for racial health justice. BARHII published a report in January 2023 titled, "[Local Health Departments and Subject Matter Experts Address Climate Change Readiness in California: Findings and Recommendations](#)." The report pushed for increased funding and resources to support public health departments across the nation with engaging in climate equity and implementing the EO model. While public health leaders often recognize the need to support equitable climate and health solutions, they may lack the resources to do so and would benefit from greater public investments. As an organization, BARHII has shifted most of their funding sources to multi-year, general operating funds so that government and community partners can continue to make progress with priorities related to health equity and racial justice. *"There is a big*

counternarrative that DEI is going away, equity is under attack. But we see progress and continued investments in this work, and we do not want that negative counter narrative at the national level to have a chilling effect. That is not us.”

Expanded the number of EOs and institutionalized them into emergency management structures. BARHII’s work to build the EO movement in California has been an exciting and new approach to addressing equity-related issues, including community resilience. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and racial justice movement, BARHII saw bright spots in the contributions of EOs and, in a short period of time, BARHII has seen more than two-thirds of counties in the Bay Area establish EO positions. *“We’ve been really proud to play a role in the growth of [the EO] movement and working to ensure that the building of this infrastructure results in tangible equity outcomes for communities where we have EOs.”* BARHII has seen an increasing number of senior public health leaders prioritizing the implementation of BARHII’s recommendations to drive equity into emergency management.

Key Partners

Organization	Type
San Francisco Bay Area Health Departments	Health Partner
American Public Health Association	Health Partner
California Department of Public Health	Government Partner
NACCHO	Health Partner
Public Health Alliance of Southern California	Health Partner
San Joaquin Valley Public Health Consortium	Health Partner
SF Bay Conservation & Development Commission	Government Partner
California Pan-Ethnic Health Network	Health Partner

Insights from CCHE Initiative

- **Government agencies and EOs need to be positioned to take advantage of moments of opportunity.** The COVID-19 pandemic was an inflection point and teaching moment around how important sudden moments of change can influence a variety of systems. When government agencies are positioned to capitalize on moments of intense change, then transformational progress can happen (e.g., when government funding pipelines align with health equity-related goals).
- **Local health departments and EOs need the internal capacity to collaborate with each other.** Public health departments need to continue coordinating on work at the intersection of climate, health, and equity in ways that are aligned with EOs. With ongoing coordination, EOs will feel more supported and local health departments can more effectively develop and advance equitable climate and health solutions.

Looking Ahead

BARHII will continue to train and connect EOs and expand the EO model beyond California. Additionally, BARHII plans to engage public health leaders of color in a new cohort that will launch in 2025. BARHII will continue to provide various training programs, including the Action Lab, to convene public health departments, EOs, and other government stakeholders to advance the integration of health equity and racial justice priorities into government systems. Through these efforts, BARHII aims to create a sustainable and equitable public health infrastructure that can be adapted to other regions nationwide.