



Boston Health Notes

*A monthly column of the Boston Public Health Commission
& Mayor Thomas M. Menino*

April, 2008

Climate Change and Public Health – What You Can Do To Help *by Paul Shoemaker, MPH; Associate Director, Environmental Health Office*

National Public Health Week is April 7 through 13, 2008. This year's theme is, *Climate Change: Our Health in the Balance*. The Boston Public Health Commission is encouraging residents to take steps to reduce climate change and protect their health.

By now, most people have heard of climate change or global warming. Both of these terms describe a process that scientists have been studying for several decades – the planet as a whole is getting warmer. That doesn't mean that we've seen the last of snow in Boston or that every day will be a record high, but it does mean that the average temperature throughout the year is going up slowly but steadily. The result is changes in weather patterns, such as more heat waves and sudden cold snaps, which can have a serious impact on our health.

- Longer, warmer, and wetter summers can encourage the growth of mosquitoes that can carry West Nile Virus or Eastern Equine Encephalitis;
- Heat waves can put the elderly and people with health problems in danger of heat stroke, heart attacks, and other life-threatening events;
- Severe storms (in winter and summer) can cause flooding, damage property, but also promote mold growth in homes, which can trigger asthma;
- Extreme cold snaps raise heating bills putting those without proper housing and heating at risk of frostbite, hypothermia, and death.

What You Can Do

The City of Boston and the Public Health Commission are working in a number of ways to reduce climate change and prepare for its impact. On April 13, 2007 Mayor Menino issued an executive order setting greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals for the city. These include reducing our annual greenhouse gas emissions seven percent below 1990 levels by 2012 and 80 percent below 1990 levels by 2050. The executive order also establishes policies for efficient buildings, renewable energy, and the use of hybrid

vehicles. As part of this initiative, the Boston Public Health Commission and city partners launched a new hybrid taxi, called CleanAir Cabs.

The city has taken major steps to reduce climate change, but we still have a long way to go. There are steps that every Bostonian can take to reduce the use of fossil fuels (gasoline, coal, oil, natural gas) and therefore reduce climate change:

- **Unplug your chargers.** Any device that has a charger uses electricity if the charger is plugged in, even if the device is turned off or not attached. Unplugging the charger cord can save you money on your electric bill and help protect the environment.
- **Turn off lights and electronics.** Even if you'll only be out of the room for a couple of minutes, save electricity by turning off the lights. Make sure electronics like televisions, stereos, and computers are turned off when you're not using them. Think about plugging these into a power strip with an on/off switch that you can turn off when not in use.
- **Save gas.** Combine several errands into one trip to save on gas. Keep your car in good shape (regular servicing and tune-ups, keep the tires properly inflated, etc.) to get the best mileage possible out of your car. Whenever you can, consider walking or public transportation.
- **Be prepared.** Get together a kit of important items that you will need in case of a weather emergency or other major event. You can find instructions and help with putting together an emergency kit at www.ready.gov.

For more information on how you can take action to reduce your carbon footprints:

- BPHC: http://www.bphc.org/bphc/hcities_climatehome.asp
- City of Boston: <http://www.cityofboston.gov/climate/default.asp>
- Take a CleanAir Cab <http://www.bphc.org/bphc/cleanaircabs.asp>
- The Commission's Environmental Health Office at 617-534-5966.