

Community Action to Fight Asthma



Report to the Community on Asthma

What is CAFA?

Community Action to Fight Asthma (CAFA) is a network of asthma coalitions from across California, reaching the rural areas of the Central Valley, the urban areas of Southern California and San Francisco, and many areas in between. CAFA works to shape local, regional, and state policies to reduce environmental triggers of asthma for school-aged children where they live, learn, and play. The Network brings together diverse constituents, nurturing a bridge between public health organizations and environmental health and justice groups, creating a more powerful voice for change. CAFA also builds the capacity of local groups to advocate for policy improvements.

Why are we concerned about asthma?

Asthma is the most common chronic childhood disease in the country, affecting 6.3 million children.¹ It is also the most common cause of disability among children and the leading cause of school absences due to chronic disease, costing children their education and our schools their attendance-based revenue. In California, 1 in 6 children under 18 years of age has been diagnosed with asthma.² Although asthma affects all ages, races, and ethnic groups in America, low-income and some minority populations experience substantially higher rates of fatalities, hospital admissions, and emergency room visits due to asthma. Poor environmental conditions also mean more asthma attacks for children with asthma. However, a combination of good clinical management and decreased exposure to environmental triggers of asthma can prevent asthma attacks. Indeed, communities across California are taking action to help our children breathe easier.

Reports to the Community

For Asthma Awareness Month this May, the CAFA coalitions have each published a report card to document the current state of asthma and the environmental triggers they are working to reduce in their communities. All of the reports provide policy recommendations to improve indoor and outdoor air

quality. Some include suggestions to increase effective medical management and others support a broad range of social and environmental justice issues. Below is a summary of the recommendations in CAFA's three priority areas: schools, housing, and outdoor air.

Schools

A nationwide survey of school facilities found that California ranked last, having more unsatisfactory environmental conditions in schools than any other state.³ Identifying asthma triggers in schools and working systematically to eliminate them can help reduce the frequency and intensity of asthma attacks. Suggested policies to improve school environments, including indoor air quality, include:

- Implementing a comprehensive and effective Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) Management Plan (e.g., the Environmental Protection Agency's Tools for Schools program) with policies and procedures for all child development and K-12 school sites.
- Changing maintenance policies to prioritize low-allergy landscaping for all new or renovating schools.
- Increasing resources for school facility repair, including working with school districts to secure funding from the State's Emergency Repair Program (ERP) to make repairs and improve IAQ in schools.
- Creating sustainable funding for maintenance and custodial services to better support facilities management best practices such as: asthma-friendly cleaning; environmentally preferable purchasing; green construction and maintenance practices such as those offered by the Collaborative for High Performing Schools; and integrated pest management procedures to control pests.
- Adopting Asthma and Wellness Policies, including IAQ protocols, a dedicated asthma nurse, and asthma education for staff, students, and parents/guardians.

Outdoor Air Quality

Every year, millions of pounds of dangerous chemicals, gases, and particles are released into the air by vehicles, power plants, factories, and other industrial sources that have serious effects on health and asthma. A recent report found that 9 of the 10 most ozone-polluted counties in the country are within California.⁴ Suggested policies to improve outdoor air quality related to asthma triggers include:

- Adopting land-use policies that protect public health including: smart growth principles that minimize sources of pollutants, particularly diesel emissions from rail yards, ports, distribution centers, and truck routes; standards that promote the use of new and emerging non-polluting technologies; and relocating industrial facilities away from residential neighborhoods.
- Supporting expedient attainment of the regional 8-hour ozone and PM 2.5 State and National Ambient Air Quality Standards.
- Adopting regional wood burning restrictions and ordinances.
- Developing and/or implementing state, air district, and port emission reduction plans in their entirety in order to dramatically reduce pollution from the freight transportation system.
- Ensuring all school districts adopt a policy prohibiting idling by any vehicle within 100 feet of a school facility.

Homes

The Department of Housing and Community Development reports that one in every eight dwelling units in the state is substandard.⁵ Families alone cannot initiate large-scale changes to improve their children's environments, so policy changes to systematically improve housing conditions, especially among renters, are a key step toward reducing the problem of asthma. Policies to reduce asthma triggers in homes and improve health conditions include:

- Enacting and enforcing healthy, affordable housing laws and high levels of penalties for non-compliance, particularly in the case of criminal, repeat violators. These penalties, in turn, can help pay for the stepped-up code enforcement.
- Institutionalizing environmental health and asthma training for code enforcers, and adopting a proactive home inspection process such as annual inspections of multi-unit housing.
- Establishing Citizen Advisory Committees to promote public awareness and outreach projects that promote toxics reduction through safe housecleaning, integrated pest management, and safe house furnishings.
- Establishing statewide standards on assessment and remediation of mold complaints.
- Promoting healthy housing best practices and the use of State incentives for asthma-friendly affordable housing development and renovation.

For more information please visit the CAFA website at www.calasthma.org.

References

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3. United States General Accounting Office Report to Congressional Requesters. 1996. School Facilities: Profiles of School Condition by State. GAO/HEHS 96-148. Internet, <http://www.gao.gov>. [Note: This is the most current statistic available on this issue. There is a lack of evidence of significant progress, suggesting that the statistic quoted is still relevant.]
4. American Lung Association. 2005. State of the Air 2005: Protect the Air You Breathe. Internet, http://lungusa2.org/embargo/sota05/SOTA05_final.pdf.
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