

**Testimony Before the Committee on Health  
Council of the District of Columbia**

**Jeff Hild, J.D.**

**Policy Director, Sumner M. Redstone Global Center for Prevention and  
Wellness**

**Milken Institute School of Public Health  
The George Washington University**

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Good afternoon, and thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of the “Health Impact Assessment Program Establishment Act” (B23-89). I am Jeff Hild, the Policy Director at the Redstone Global Center for Prevention and Wellness at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University. The thoughts conveyed in my testimony are my own and do not represent those of George Washington University.

Passing the Health Impact Assessment Program Establishment Act would put the District at the forefront of states, cities and other municipalities who are utilizing tools such as Health Impact Assessments (“HIA”) to improve health for all residents and incorporate health considerations into planning and development. I would like to thank Council Member Grosso for introducing this legislation and to Chair Gray for cosponsoring. I urge the committee to move forward with the legislation and make needed improvements to further strengthen it.

Health Impact Assessments Can Make the District Healthier

We have known for some time that the main drivers of health are the community conditions in which we live, learn, work, play and worship. What impacts health the most are things like the quality of our housing, our ability to access healthy foods and safely exercise, the reliability of transportation, and economic and educational opportunities. These drivers of health are commonly called social determinants and are much more impactful on health outcomes than clinical care or genetics.

In the District, a large body of data shows us that deep and unacceptable health disparities exist and that they are primarily the result of structural inequities and social determinants. We should be shocked, but not surprised, that a resident in Ward 7 has a life expectancy thirteen years shorter than a Ward 3 resident when Ward 7 has just two full service grocery stores, limited transportation options, and higher rates of violence and poverty. DC Health’s 2018 Health Equity Report provides a comprehensive overview of health inequities in the District and shows that those disparities are getting worse, not better. Implementing a Health Impact Assessment could address that trend by providing health evidence and engaging community participation in decisions about development in the District.

Health Impact Assessments evaluate both the potential positive and negative effects of proposed policies, programs, and projects on the health and well-being of a community. HIAs combine data, analysis, and community input to determine how a particular project or proposal could affect health and how its benefits or impacts might be spread among different groups of people. HIAs also include evidence-based recommendations of how a project or proposal can mitigate adverse impacts and enhance health benefits.

HIAs are similar to the well-established Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), that have been used for nearly 50 years to assess the environmental impacts of major projects. An EIS does not determine policy, but is a tool that decision makers can use to ensure they have a full picture of the impacts of a proposal prior to finalizing a decision, including its potential risks, benefits, mitigation strategies and options. The HIA is a logical extension of this model.

#### HIA Methodology is Well Established and Replicable in the District

The methodology and processes for conducting an HIA are well established, and research shows the essential steps for conducting an effective HIA. This methodology includes the multi-disciplinary nature of an HIA as well as the key role that continuous and meaningful community participation plays in the process. Given this established evidence base, translating the HIA methodology to a program in the District would be feasible.

HIAs have begun to be used in individual projects in various parts of the country. For example, the development of the “Beltline” in Atlanta was informed by an HIA that recommended increased affordable housing, greenspace and trails, and connectivity to existing civic spaces and adding a public health professional the key decision making board. The result was a project built to maximize the health benefits of residents.

There are ample examples of how HIAs could be applied in the District. In August 2016, the Department of Health published the Buzzard Point Community Health and Safety Study (“CHASS”) primarily at the behest of residents worried about multiple construction projects and their attendant negative impacts on resident’s health. The CHASS was comprehensive and provided a detailed analysis of resident’s health, potential impacts due to the projects and recommendations for mitigation. While the CHASS certainly lessened some of the health impacts on the community, the process would have more impactful had it occurred earlier—prior to construction beginning and design decisions being finalized—and been part of an over-arching policy in the District. In fact, the first recommendation made by DoH in the CHASS is for the District to develop criteria for when an HIA should be completed *prior* to final approval of a project<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, a robust HIA related to the design and

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<sup>1</sup> *Buzzard Point Community Health and Safety Study*, District of Columbia Department of Health (August 2016) (retrieved from: [https://doh.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/page\\_content/attachments/Buzzard%20Point%20Community%20Health%20and%20Safety%20Study%20\(CHASS\)%20August%202016.pdf](https://doh.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/doh/page_content/attachments/Buzzard%20Point%20Community%20Health%20and%20Safety%20Study%20(CHASS)%20August%202016.pdf))

construction of the new hospital at the Saint Elizabeth's site could lead to a true health hub that could address both the acute and chronic health needs of the community, and could also address social determinants, such as access to food and economic opportunity. Given the widening health disparities in the District, this type of visionary policy change promises improved health for all of our residents.

#### The Health Impact Assessment Program Establishment Act Should Be Improved and Moved Forward

The proposed legislation would join HIAs with the District's Environmental Impact Statement process for major projects. The legislation would establish an HIA program that would examine the relationship between a proposed project and the health of the affected community, including an examination of those populations most impacted and the likely cumulative health effects of the project. Importantly, the legislation makes it clear that public involvement in the process, particularly the engagement of residents in the impacted community, is essential. For each project the legislation would require a Health Impact Statement that analyzes potential impacts on key drivers of health, including transportation choices, food access, employment and economic opportunities for residents in the community, and access to services and recreational opportunities. This type of analysis, conducted prior to a project being finalized, would bring health considerations and community voice to the forefront and provide a clear blueprint on how to improve and enhance the health effects of a given project.

Although we support the legislation as introduced, there are several areas where it could be strengthened. First, while the Department of Health is the appropriate governmental entity to administer an HIA program, the legislation should include a mechanism for engaging an outside entity to produce the individual HIAs. It is unlikely that the Department of Health has the internal capacity to both administer and produce HIA. Second, the provisions related to community engagement could be made more specific and enhanced. Transparent and meaningful community input is at the heart of the HIA process and the Committee should consider ways to strengthen those provisions in the bill, perhaps by including a community voice on the advisory committee and specifying when the community should be involved in the HIA process. Finally, the Committee should consider adding a provision related to the impacts of a proposed project on community cohesion and community networks. As the District grows, displacement of long-time community members from their support networks can have a negative impact on health and well-being.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on the Health Impact Assessment Program Establishment Act. The District could become the first state to implement a comprehensive mechanism to conduct HIAs should the Health Impact Assessment Program Establishment Act become law, and its passage would be a large step toward implementing health in all policies and ensuring that the District's growth will increase the well-being of all residents.

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