



Talking Points

Making the Case for Environmental Health

The following talking points model how to use research-tested frame elements—the Value of Fairness across Places, the Metaphors of Ground Crew and Upstream Environments/Downstream Health, and the use of Explanatory Chains—to craft messages that help the public to think more productively about environmental health as a policy field and matter of public concern. For more explicit explanations of each of the frame elements below, see the Message Cards included in this toolkit. You can also read more about the research behind each frame element in the Multimedia Resources section of the toolkit.

These talking points can be used flexibly—as a source of themes for longer written pieces, as short responses in media interviews or public appearances, or as set-ups to “pre-frame” a conversation on specific policy or program proposals. Each pulls from rigorously tested messages that have been shown to expand and shift public thinking on environmental health in productive directions. They need not be used word for word, but when adapting, communicators should take care to maintain the core frame elements in each. For this reason, in this document, some talking points overlap—the repetition here illustrates how to use the same frame element in different ways.

FAIRNESS ACROSS PLACES

- No matter where they live, all Americans deserve healthy environments and need to have the opportunity to live in healthy environmental conditions. To make this happen, we need to improve the environmental health systems in all communities and give everyone the opportunity to live free from environmental threats. This means that we need to devote more resources to places that are facing the greatest threats. The bottom line is that we all need to make sure that all Americans have the opportunity to live in healthy communities.
- Your zip code should not determine whether you get sick or not. Health should not be distributed by lottery. Americans deserve healthy environments no matter where they live. To make this happen, we need to improve the environmental health systems in all communities and give everyone the opportunity to live free from environmental threats.

GROUND CREW

- An airport ground crew uses its technical expertise to repair, maintain and coordinate the planes in an airport to keep them working and safe. This takes skill, planning and specialized training. Just as the ground crew at an airport makes sure everything is going smoothly on the runway, there is a ground crew for environmental health. Professionals on the “environmental health ground crew” use their expertise and skills to make sure we build and maintain environmental conditions that are healthy for people to live in. We need to make sure that our environmental health workforce has diverse skills, is highly trained, and can work together to ensure that the places where we live, work, and play are healthy and safe.
- Just as Americans rely on a ground crew at the airport to make sure they can land safely without having to do it themselves, we all rely on an “environmental health ground crew” that studies our environment and how it might affect our health. The environmental health field makes sure our air, water, food, and housing supplies are safe for us all. No one can do this alone. It requires skilled professionals who are trained to go upstream and see what problems we are being exposed to, and figure out ways to protect us from unhealthy environments. This is the work that our public health agencies need to do—and need funding to do. Concern is not enough to protect people; we have to support and invest in the ground crew of environmental health.

UPSTREAM ENVIRONMENTS/DOWNSTREAM HEALTH

- We all live “downstream” from a range of environmental factors that affect our health. By ourselves, we can’t control all the things that happen “upstream” in our environments, but there are people who specialize in studying, inspecting, and working upstream. We need these environmental health workers to pay attention to what is happening upstream, and ensure that what eventually flows downstream is healthy and safe.
- When upstream solutions are put in place—reducing vehicle emissions, for example—it affects the health of people downstream who enjoy better air quality. These actions have cascading effects. For example, better air quality allows more people to exercise outdoors, further enhancing their health. When we support environmental health professionals in doing their work, we create positive health cascades.
- We need to devote more resources to places and populations that are facing the greatest threats. When we invest in upstream inspections to make sure that the foods being delivered to all Americans are safe and healthy, we invest in healthy communities. It’s not enough to catch problems downstream, once people become ill. We need to have a wide array of environmental health professionals use their expertise to catch problems before they occur. And we need rules that make sure the products we get have been inspected well in advance of our use.
- [Current policies/initiatives] are all efforts to address the upstream causes of environmental health problems. We need organizations like [CDC/ATSDR/FDA/other environmental health agency] to resolve health risks before they get downstream, where they undermine people’s abilities to live healthy lives. When the environmental health ground crew is making sure that conditions are safe for us to go about our business, people can rely on [the safety of food and other products in our markets/their neighborhood’s air and water quality/the safety of their housing structures/other relevant examples] to support their family’s and community’s health. Without this assurance, we are left with a random distribution system where some people get healthy products and others don’t, and it is impossible for the average person to do anything about it.

EXPLANATORY CHAIN CONNECTING CLIMATE CHANGE TO HUMAN HEALTH IMPACTS

- Climate change creates real risks for people’s health. When we burn fossil fuels such as coal and gas, we release carbon dioxide into the air, which builds up and traps the Earth’s heat. This “blanket effect” results in more frequent heat waves and severe storms, which lead to injuries and deaths. These and other effects of climate change, such as the increased spread of infectious disease due to the increase in average temperatures, are already causing serious health problems. We can limit these health problems and avoid worse consequences by reducing the amount of coal and gas we use.