Helpful Context for Replication: Lessons Learned and Process Notes
Alameda County Air Quality Communications Protocol, December 2019

What is the protocol document?

This protocol provides guidance to local governments regarding communications to residents and employees at each level of deteriorating air quality on the EPA Air Quality Index's color-coded rubric.

Can we use this protocol in our organization?

We hope that this protocol will be useful as a template or starting point for other jurisdictions' protocols. In the same way, we modeled this protocol on one developed by the City and County of San Francisco.

How did you use another local government's protocol as a model?

The Air Quality Action Sheet used by the City and County of San Francisco Department of Emergency Management was a model for our process. The San Francisco team that developed their protocol presented the structure of the document at a workshop that convened Alameda County staff to give input on what a County protocol should look like. At the workshop, participants were directed to imagine protocol use in different scenarios, consider input from the local community, and draw from their own expertise to provide recommendations for how best to adapt the document for use within the Alameda County context. We recommend using the cross-agency workshop model described below or another means of convening all relevant parties to review and amend the protocol, followed by a working group to make more specific edits. We found it most effective for the working group to engage both implementation-level and decision-level staff of the County agencies that would be implementing the protocol.

What were the key steps to develop this protocol?

The Alameda County Air Quality Communications Protocol was created through a process adapted from the County's Climate Adaptation Workshop Planning Guide. The Guide outlines an approach to jumpstart adaptation action by convening relevant partners at a half-day workshop, in order to best facilitate the preparation for and implementation of a project to address a specific climate impact. (See more on the Guide at http://www.acsustain.org/what/resilience/workshop.htm.)

Following the approach described in the Guide, the Alameda County Office of Sustainability identified, contacted, and interviewed key internal project partners ahead of the workshop. Key initial partners on the project planning team included the Office of Emergency Services (OES) and the Public Health Department (PHD)'s Public Health Officer and Public Health Systems Emergency Preparedness and Response team. The Office of Sustainability met with a handful of potential workshop attendees, including the County Fire Department, and it became clear that Fire had a crucial role to play, and so was added to the project planning team.

The Office of Sustainability researched measures taken by neighboring jurisdictions and found that the City and County of San Francisco Department of Emergency Management had an Air Quality Action Sheet, which looked useful to partners and became a potential model for the County to be shared at the workshop. Before the workshop, partners agreed to staff three working group meetings following the workshop to edit the San Francisco Action Sheet or complete other recommended preparations.

An external consultant was contracted by the Public Health Department to undertake a community engagement process to assess the preferred method of advisory communication for target populations. This was a crucial way to understand the needs of our most affected residents.

The workshop itself was then conducted, with staff from the working group agencies as well as additional County agencies, regional partners, and community-based organizations. At the workshop, the San Francisco Air Quality Action Sheet was reviewed, and results from the community engagement findings were shared. Workshop breakout groups then brainstormed considerations for an official County Air Quality Communications Protocol, in addition to other actions beyond the protocol that would increase the resilience of the county to future smoke conditions.

As was agreed upon by project partners at the outset, a short-term working group was formed following the workshop, with members representing a number of County agencies involved in communications during wildfire smoke conditions and other poor air quality events. The Working Group then met to develop, revise and refine multiple drafts of the protocol, incorporating review by relevant internal and external partners. Ultimately, there were five Working Group meetings plus some one-to-one check-ins over a five-month period. All meetings were coordinated by the Office of Sustainability.

Finally, the approvals process was initiated and final guidance sought from relevant approvers.

What best practices for engaging with cross-agency stakeholders were developed through this project?

Engagement with cross-agency stakeholders was a key strategic element of this project. Here are some of the lessons learned, based on our experiences:

- Including a diversity of roles in the multidisciplinary planning team proved to be a valuable means of gathering diverse perspectives for the workshop that would frame and jumpstart protocol development.
- Conducting pre-interviews with partners that attended the workshop was crucial in identifying needs and concerns ahead of time so the convening could be modified accordingly.
- Pre-scheduling planning team meetings was helpful, as was taking the time to brief staff who work in rapid-response roles and may have had to miss meetings.
- Having requested department director sign-off on the initial grant proposal later helped the project advance. Directors were supportive of the proposal due to the importance of the work and the goal of receiving funds. At later stages of the project, departmental decision-makers at times had questions about the scope of their role and the priority level of this project that might have delayed or limited their involvement. Director support was useful to show the importance of the project. (If your project is not grant-funded, getting director approval of a project scoping document may serve a similar function.)
- Distinguishing between planning team members and advisors helped establish clear expectations and make cross-agency coordination more seamless.
- Allowing sufficient time for contracting with the outreach consultant, including unavoidable delays, ensured that the outreach findings were able to be considered at early stages of the project, including the linchpin workshop.
- Communicating in ways that center the local community was important for successful air quality communications, and including implementation-level staff in the working groups proved very effective as they would be the ones using the protocol and had a good understanding of the audience.

The 2019 version of the Adaptation Workshop Planning Guide expands on these suggestions and also covers the nuances of seeking appropriate approvals on a protocol involving multiple agencies within one local government.

Alameda County
SUSTAINABILITY
Local Action, Global Impact.

What was the project timeline, and what changes were made along the way?

This table shows the timeline of the project, with notes where changes were needed or unexpected developments took place.

Key Milestone	Date	Changes to Timeline / Lessons Learned
Office of Sustainability met with potential project partners separately	Oct.-Nov. 2018	
Office of Sustainability met with key project partners to scope grant submission; Grant submitted	Nov. 2018	
Scoped RFP for Community Engagement	Early Jan. 2019	
Awarded RFP for Community Engagement	March	Since the contracting process took a long time, we ended up with a three-month window for interviews, focus groups, and reporting results. This necessitated a timeline shift of a few weeks for the workshop, because it was essential to have conclusions from the community engagement process to consider in the workshop.
Held cross-agency workshop	June 18	As noted above, to allow more time for community engagement, we shifted the workshop date forward to mid-June.
Held Working Group (WG) meetings	July 9, July 27, Aug. 22, Sept. 20, Oct. 22	Initially, 3 WG meetings were planned. Ultimately, the WG met 3 times with implementation-level staff and 2 more times with decision-level managers. There were also 1-2 additional meetings between the Office of Sustainability and select managers. The additional meetings did not cause a delay since the first 3 WG meetings happened on a shorter timeline than planned, and additional meetings were folded into planned review.
Review proposed changes sought by relevant internal and external stakeholders	August	Over this period, the roles of cities and of each county agency were clarified in response to comments from stakeholders.
Protocol use triggered when Air Quality Index rose to "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups"	Oct. 28	The Emergency Operations Center was activated during pre-emptive utility power shutoffs designed to prevent wildfires. Other emergency communications were issued for power shutoff, and partners and resources were occupied by the power shutoff concern. However, implementation worked well, air quality messages were sent, and no major changes to the protocol were needed.
Review and approval of protocol secured by agency decision-makers within OES, Fire, and PHD	November	Working group members and advisors sought approvals from their own agency decision-makers.
Director of the Health Care Services Agency presented the final draft protocol to County Administrator and Department Heads	Nov. 27	County departmental leadership determined at this meeting that relevant agencies had the authority to approve; other approvals were not needed.
Final protocol submitted to funder	Dec. 20	

Alameda County
SUSTAINABILITY
Local Action, Global Impact.

What other products came out from the process that might be useful to other jurisdictions?

Development of the communications protocol also resulted in the co-creation of several other outputs, including a Community Partners Subscription, a Cleaner Air Center Filtration Survey, and an updated version of the Climate Adaptation Workshop Planning Guide.

Community Partners Subscription: The community engagement process, conducted by external consultants, explored what the preferred methods of advisory communications were for members of the public, particularly groups most vulnerable to smoke conditions and hard-to-reach populations. This process helped identify key communication challenges, one of which was that vulnerable community members are more likely to receive advisory communication from trusted community-based organizations (due to a lack of awareness of our official county alert system, lack of phone and internet access, and language barriers). These factors served as the impetus for creating the Community Partners List, a subscription option within our existing alert system specifically for local organizations to receive important and timely information they can share with their communities and clients.

Cleaner Air Center Filtration Survey: In order to further support more vulnerable community members, the County also developed a survey, based on newly revised EPA Guidance on wildfire smoke, to assess which of the existing cooling centers in the County might also serve as Cleaner Air Centers during poor air quality conditions. The survey was sent as an editable Google spreadsheet to city officials. Following the EPA guidance, the survey posed questions about MERV and HEPA filtration and related amenities, such as drinking water and restrooms.

Updated Workshop Planning Guide: Lessons learned from this project, particularly relating to equity, cross-agency collaboration, and community engagement, were incorporated into the County's adaptation workshop guide for local government staff. We published an updated version of a Climate Adaptation Workshop Planning Guide for other local governments interested in using this approach.

Helpful Context for Replication: Air Quality Protocol, Dec 2019