



Unequal Response Unequal Protection

The federal government has repeatedly failed to protect people exposed to toxic chemicals in communities across the United States. This failure stems from a fundamental lack of structured investigative response capacity by the federal government and inadequate scientific tools/methods for investigating health outcomes related to widespread chemical exposures in communities.

Federal Response to Epidemics, Contaminated Food and Disasters

There are existing structured responses for many public health exposure situations. For instance, if the public is exposed to an infectious disease or to a contaminated food source, there is an immediate and urgent response by federal agencies to investigate and eliminate the risks. There are also emergency and disaster response teams for investigating spills and accidents. Both the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have programs in place with clear proactive protocols that are activated to respond almost immediately. The CDC has its Outbreak Response Team that can be triggered when as few as two people get the same illness from the same contaminated food or drink. CDC provides rapid assistance to states, federal agencies, and others for outbreaks of infectious and non-communicable diseases. Requests trigger immediate investigations that respond rapidly to serious and urgent public health crises. The FDA has its Coordinated Outbreak Response and Evaluation (CORE) Network that includes an early detection system that triggers one of three response teams. The National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) is set up to immediately respond and protect public health during disasters and other emergencies through its Disaster Research and Response (DR2) Program.

Federal Response to Area-wide Chemical Exposures

In contrast, if the public is at risk from exposure to wide spread toxic chemicals in a community setting such as Love Canal or Flint, MI, there is no rapid response capacity and the ensuing investigation is uncoordinated and often reactionary. These investigations typically take years to complete and rarely lead to action. Even if an investigation determines that a cancer cluster does exist, there are no guidelines to direct federal or state agencies on how to respond. This often results in government taking no action to address high rates of cancer or other illnesses that might have been identified in the investigation.

This response is unacceptable and has contributed to a serious loss of confidence in government and public leadership. It also has significant impact on low-wealth populations and communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by exposures to toxic chemicals.