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Health Experts Say General Iron Permitting Process Flawed and Needs to “Center Community Voice from Step One”

Growing Consensus that the Chicago Department of Public Health is Failing to Follow Standards for Health Impact Assessment and Community Engagement

CHICAGO (Dec. 9, 2021) -- Dr. Jonathan Heller, former President of the Society of Practitioners of Health Impact Assessment (HIA), is adding his voice to a growing number of health professionals that are criticizing the Chicago Department of Public Health’s (CDPH) permitting process.

“For a sensitive decision like the permitting of a metal recycling plant on Chicago's Southeast Side, with concerns about environmental justice and racism, it is especially important that a Health Impact Assessment be carried out following well-documented best practices for community engagement in HIA,” says Dr. Heller.

Health professionals are saying that the City’s health department risks perpetuating health and racial inequities. CDPH referenced an HIA Handbook co-authored by Dr. Heller in slides presented during its first community engagement session held online November 4th. Heller’s critique underscores residents’ complaints about CDPH’s handling of the assessment.

“Omitting the community entirely from the critical first three steps of the HIA—scoping, screening and assessment—was a terrible way to start. They completely left us out,” said Olga Bautista, Executive Director, Southeast Environmental Task Force, on [WTTW Chicago Tonight](#), Wednesday evening.

The statement echoes concern expressed after the first HIA meeting by Joanna Tess, MPH, Leadership Team, Collaborative for Health Equity Cook County, who said “I hope that Dr. Arwady of CDPH does not use this HIA as an instrument of oppression. I hope Mayor Lightfoot does not use this HIA to pursue a particular agenda—other than health justice.”

Dr. Heller says, “The entire validity of the HIA depends on the full and authentic inclusion of the community's voice at every step in the process. To not do so perpetuates health and racial inequities in Chicago, siding with the powerful business owners and against those who have been disenfranchised historically. If the City of Chicago is serious about advancing equity, it needs to start the HIA process over again, and center community voice from step one.”

Heller's statement highlights a divide between CDPH and an increasing number of public health organizations and leaders. In an unusual step the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health (UIC SPH) released a public letter calling on the City to deny the permit for operation of the metal recycling operation. [That letter has been signed by the Dean, Wayne H. Giles](#), and already has 500 individual signatures. Organizations among the 41 listed as supporting the UIC SPH letter include Rush University, Sinai Urban Health Institute, Metropolitan Planning Council, and Human Impact Partners, Oakland CA.

Mayor Lori Lightfoot directed the Chicago Department of Public Health to carry out the assessment of the health impact of pollution from the proposed relocation of General Iron/ RMG on Southeast Chicago residents, after receiving that request in a letter from US EPA Chief Michael Regan.

Just this year, the City of Chicago declared that 'racism is a public health crisis.' The proposed operation of the General Iron facility on the Southeast Side—having moved from a predominantly white and wealthy neighborhood to a predominantly Latinx, Black, and working class area—is a textbook case of environmental racism. Because of this, the City's health equity and environmental justice commitments, and the preponderance of evidence against adding pollution to an overburdened part of Chicago, the permit should be denied.

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