

HOUSTON ENDOWMENT



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Improving Greater Houston's Air Quality

A unique collaboration seeks to improve air quality by engaging the public. Houston Endowment is providing over \$1.6 million in support for a comprehensive media campaign – involving several project partners – to make air quality information more accessible and easier to understand.

Houston Endowment's Board recently voted to support an innovative project to elevate public awareness about the health impacts of local air quality. The collaborative initiative, supported by a \$1.6 million Houston Endowment grant, brings together a number of organizations working to improve air quality in greater Houston. The partners will collaborate to provide accessible and easily-understood information about air pollution and engage residents to participate in meaningful action, including advocacy efforts, to improve air quality.

There are many days each year when greater Houston residents are exposed to concentrations of air pollutants that increase the risk for serious health outcomes such as heart attacks or asthma events. New science indicates that health risks exist even at concentrations of pollutants below the current health-based standard. Much current information about local air quality and its effects is not readily accessible to the general public or easy to understand. The partners will work together to develop a campaign brand, coordinate media strategies, train community ambassadors and explore new avenues for sharing up-to-date information about air pollution in the area – with the ultimate goal of spurring stakeholder action to improve air quality.

The project partners include:

- Environmental Defense Fund
- Air Alliance Houston
- Environmental Integrity Project
- Environment Texas
- Public Citizen
- Rice University

“This generous award provides an unprecedented opportunity for partners working on air quality issues to leverage a public media campaign to raise awareness of the harms of air pollution and to engage the public in calling for solutions that will lead to better health for all Houstonians,” said Elena Craft, PhD, Senior Health Scientist at Environmental Defense Fund.

The grant to support this media campaign is the result of Houston Endowment's long-standing involvement and support for efforts to improve air quality in greater Houston. In 2013, the foundation began to convene air quality grant partners to discuss possible barriers to reducing harmful emissions in the region. The group noted a general lack of public awareness and concern about air pollution and its health impacts. With support from Houston Endowment, the group then worked with experts in the field of communications to explore public perceptions about air quality and consider strategies to increase understanding and engagement.

The resulting report provided compelling evidence that the public could be motivated to act if they had access to reliable and easily understood information about air pollution levels, potential health consequences, and the steps they could take to help improve air quality.

"The findings about Houstonians' perceptions were striking," shared Houston Endowment Senior Program Officer Elizabeth Love. "We learned that once people learn the health impacts of poor air quality and that viable strategies exist to tackle air pollution, they are motivated to act. Houston Endowment is proud to support efforts to harness this energy, and appreciate the partners' collaborative, data-driven approach."

Over the next three years, the project partners will work together on numerous interconnected strategies to better educate and engage residents. Immediate milestones include identifying a dedicated project coordinator – hired by Environmental Defense Fund and housed with Air Alliance Houston – and developing a unified campaign brand.