

## BACKGROUNDER



### THE HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM

#### Putting you in the picture

In March 1992, Health and Welfare Canada (HWC) rose to the challenge of Canada's Green Plan and set in motion the new **Healthy Environment Program**. The intent of this program is to help Canadians understand - and make decisions based upon - the relationship between a healthy environment and human health. The timeframe for the program is six years, from 1992 to 1998. It is one initiative stemming from the Green Plan's Action Plan on Health and the Environment.

At this stage of program development, the Health Services and Promotion Branch of Health and Welfare Canada is reaching out to potential partners - organizations, agencies and individuals - who are willing and able to work with the **Healthy Environment Program**. HWC is looking for support in the development, refinement, implementation and delivery of the program.

This document outlines the objectives and main elements of the **Healthy Environment Program**. It finishes with a look at the kinds of partnerships that are required to make the **Healthy Environment Program** a reality.

This is a background document, intended to brief you on the issues we will be discussing in greater detail in focus groups and interviews.

#### Where does the healthy environment program's concept come from?

In 1986, HWC acknowledged in the document *Achieving Health for All*, that a healthy environment is one of three mechanisms (the others being self-care and mutual aid) necessary to ensure human health. From the beginning, the concept of a healthy environment has implied action - the creation of conditions and surroundings conducive to human health.

An environment, for program purposes, is defined as a physical environment, either natural or built, in which people live. It is a place where people can exert influence or control: the workplace, schools, home and community.

Creating a healthy environment may be defined as altering or adapting social, economic or physical surroundings in ways that will help not only to preserve but also to enhance human health.

HWC recognizes that regulation alone cannot address all required health and environment issues. Changes in attitude and behaviour are involved. This means Canadians must be encouraged to act on their own. Also, partnerships must be developed (with communities and provinces, individuals and organizations, volunteer groups, private sector companies, both small and large) to help in delivery of the **Healthy Environment Program**.

HWC's commitment to healthy environments links directly with Canada's **Green Plan**. A principal aim of the **Green Plan** is to promote individual and collective actions that reduce or eliminate potential threats to human health posed by environmental degradation. Thus, the **Green Plan** also places top priority on creating and preserving healthy environments.

The **Healthy Environment Program** is part of the Action Plan on Health and Environment that HWC announced in March, 1992 as a Green Plan initiative. Figure 1 shows where the program fits into the spectrum of department initiatives.

### **What is the Healthy Environment Program trying to achieve?**

The **Healthy Environment Program** seeks to prompt changes in the Canadian way of life. Such changes will occur when Canadians can better understand how their actions and choices hurt or help their environment and, consequently, their own health. More important, changes will happen when Canadians participate directly. Creating a healthy environment requires action.

To get there, the program seeks to:

- ▶ Create a vision of what a healthy environment should be;
- ▶ Empower individuals and groups to make decisions and changes that create and sustain that healthy environment;
- ▶ Motivate Canadians to participate in those changes; and
- ▶ Support the change process.

The cumulative effect of these activities should be to create and sustain a positive social climate for change.

### **What are the program elements?**

The **Healthy Environment Program** will have four interrelated elements.

A **Public Awareness Initiative** will focus attention on priority issues. It will seek to foster the development of a social change process and provide information on individual and collective actions supporting positive change.

A **National Resource Centre** will collect, package and disseminate information. A database will be established to include information on health risks, on issues and trends, and on opportunities for involvement by groups and individuals in communities, the workplace, home and school.

**Regional Workshops** will facilitate community action plans, skills development and information exchange, and will be a forum for sharing success stories.

**Directed Funding** will support action in a variety of settings (for example, workplace, schools, homes, communities) and help non-profit groups and agencies to initiate, expand, and assess their healthy environment projects.

## How can you help?

By giving the program some thought and by providing ...

- ▶ **Feedback on the program's elements and suggestions about priorities.** HWC wants to focus on issues and settings where help is most needed: what are they? It wants to learn from the experience of others already actively promoting healthy environments: what has made a difference, and what has not been effective?
- ▶ **Recommendations on the scope and content of the program.** Should the program's approach be broadbased or issue- and setting-specific? Do you know of current projects or initiatives that fit in with this program? Could the program complement the work you or others are doing? What information needs to be communicated? How can it be made non-technical? What advice do you have about the best ways to stimulate constructive action? What are the possible roadblocks?
- ▶ **Suggestions on Partnerships.** What sort of support does the program need in order to work? Who should the program's partners be? Are there specific groups or individuals who must be included and why? Do you know of organizations with the funds, expertise and communications skills to contribute to the program? Where should partnerships be developed? How do you see yourself fitting in?

Please keep in mind that the **Healthy Environment Program** should not duplicate (although it may supplement) work already underway. It should be a catalyst for more activity.

**What comes next?**

**Making contacts.** Representatives of the **Healthy Environment Program** will contact you to request an interview or invite you to a small group session nearby where these and other questions will be discussed.

**Careful planning.** Based on feedback and insight from many sectors, regions and interest groups through interviews, group discussions and public opinion surveys, the priorities of the **Healthy Environment Program** will be set, targets established and partnerships developed.

And then - **ACTION.**

Attachment: Figure 1

Figure 1 HEALTHY ENVIRONMENT PROGRAM: SCOPE OF THE PROGRAM

