New Canadian toolkit helps health care facilities prepare for climate change-related hazards

Toronto, Ontario. April 19, 2013 – The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care, with research and technical support from Health Canada, is pleased to announce the release of the Health Care Facility Climate Change Resiliency Toolkit. The toolkit was co-developed for use by health care facilities to assess their resiliency to the impacts of climate change.

Health care facilities in Canada are vulnerable to climate change. Climate-related hazards are expected to create risks that can disrupt health care facility services and delivery. Extreme weather events (e.g. storms, floods, wildfires, extreme temperature events) can create emergencies by damaging infrastructure, compromising access to critical resources (e.g. food and water) and safety of patients, visitors and staff. Climate change increases risks of some infectious diseases (vector-, water- and food-borne, new and emerging) and worsens air quality. Climate-related hazards can have significant implications for demand on health care facility services.

The World Health Organization has called on the health care sector to prepare for climate change impacts through efforts to increase resiliency. Health care organisations in Canada can increase resiliency by continually mainstreaming climate change into risk assessments, considering climate change when developing plans and activities and engaging in broader community discussions and initiatives around climate-related issues. For example, health care and public health professionals and staff, can prepare for climate change by assessing risks from extreme weather events, readiness to manage climate-related infectious disease outbreaks or atypical cases and increasing understanding of how gradual shifts in weather can affect risk profile. Health care facilities can reduce risks of climate change through proper management of critical resources (e.g. pharmaceuticals, food, transportation, medical supplies and equipment) based on climate change considerations. A resilient health care facility is also one that commits to sustainable practices, such as water and energy conservation, promoting active transportation, and local food procurement. In investing in resiliency activities in these areas, health care facilities can reduce operating costs and increase resilience in the community.

The Health Care Facility Climate Change Resiliency Toolkit includes three components: The Facilitators Guide, which introduces the toolkit and guides the users through a suggested approach, an Assessment Checklist which facilities can use to assess their resiliency and a Best Practices and Resources Guide for additional resources. The checklist includes questions in many areas, such as: emergency management, facilities management, health care services and supply chain management. Completion of the assessment checklist by officials with knowledge and experience in these areas will increase awareness and inform resiliency activities to reduce climate change risks. The checklist has been tested in six pilot facilities in Canada and has been informed by a panel of expert reviewers. A workshop in Bedford, Nova Scotia on March 20th, 2013 was held to finalise the toolkit and obtain feedback from project pilot participants and stakeholders.

"Participating as a pilot site has been an invaluable experience for our team," said David MacKenzie, VP – Operations with the Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health Authority. "The toolkit challenged how we are planning for events and with the recent experience of Sandy in New Jersey and New York, reinforced our conviction in these strategies. Extreme weather events are happening more frequently and can be catastrophic for communities that don’t understand or prepare appropriately."

"As a member-driven association of health and community services organisations spanning the entire health continuum, Health Association Nova Scotia is pleased to help disseminate the results of this important project, examining the impact of climate change on health facilities," says Mary Lee, President and CEO. "The physical environment is an important determinant of health and Nova Scotia health care organisations recognize the significance of creating and using sustainable practices as part of a holistic approach to improving the health of their communities and contributing to a sustainable future for the Nova Scotians they serve. Recent evidence also suggests there are opportunities to enhance patient care and reduce costs through energy efficiency initiatives. This pilot study and resulting toolkit promises to provide valuable information to support organisations to build on existing initiatives and reinforce their preparedness to maintain optimal levels of patient care during a weather-related disaster or other climate change event."
Support for this initiative has also been received from the Maritime Chapter of the Canadian Health Care Engineering Society (www.ches.org). CHES Maritime representative Robert Barss (Manager, Facility Services, South Shore District Health Authority) speaks on their behalf. “As the managers of health care’s infrastructure, CHES Maritime is excited to help the Coalition and its partners develop the assessment tool and explore opportunities to make our hospitals more resilient and more sustainable in the face of growing climate change and worsening climactic incidents. It is incumbent upon us to be as prepared as possible and to be ready to deliver the best possible patient care from a safe and functional healing facility during times of disaster.”

The official launch of the Health Care Facility Climate Change Resiliency Toolkit will take place at a public webinar on May 8, 2013. Details for joining the webinar can be found at www.greenhealthcare.ca/climateresilienthealthcare.

Guidance resources from Health Canada have helped inform the development of the Health Care Facility Climate Change Resiliency Toolkit. Health Canada has developed a series of technical guidance documents for health care professionals to enhance their understanding of vulnerability to extreme heat events, and their ability to identify effective preventative measures. These resources include a vulnerability assessment methodology, a best practices guidebook to assist public health and emergency management officials prepare for extreme heat events, as well as heat-health brochures and factsheets for the public. (http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-smt/pubs/clinimat/index-eng.php#factsheets)

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The Canadian Coalition for Green Health Care is Canada’s premier integrated green health care resource network; a national voice and catalyst for environmental change. For over ten years, the Coalition has been helping those working in health care facilities, non-governmental and governmental organisations, individuals, students and businesses to share green health care best practices and to become better equipped to deal with the growing demands placed upon them to be environmentally responsible health service workers and individuals. Together with our members, volunteers and supportive health care community, we strive to reduce health care’s ecological impact from compassionate care delivery while providing a nurturing platform upon which to discuss and promote best practices, innovation and environmental responsibility. www.greenhealthcare.ca. Funding support is gratefully acknowledged from the Ontario Trillium Foundation.