

TURNING CONCERN INTO ACTION

Community Air Quality Tool Kit

A Manual to Help
Residents Improve
Their Environment



The Community Air Quality Tool Kit was part of a three year collaborative project funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and led by *Mothers for Clean Air*. The “Improving Environmental Quality through Collaboration” project took place in Southeast Houston (Assistance ID # PS-83161601). Members of the community, regulatory agencies, elected officials, industry, schools and universities, and other organizations met monthly in 2005-2007 to improve environmental health for residents exposed to toxic air pollution. The following partners participated in the project:

Mothers for Clean Air

City of Houston

Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services

Texas Commission on Environmental Quality

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

U.S. Representative Gene Green’s office

State Representative Rick Noriega’s office

Harris County Commissioner Sylvia Garcia’s office

Houston City Council Member Carol Alvarado’s office

University of Texas School of Public Health

University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

Cesar Chavez High School

Raul Yzaguirre School for Success

Meadowbrook Civic Club

Environmental Defense Fund

Texas Petrochemicals

Valero Refining

LyondellBasell-Houston Refining LP

Goodyear Chemical

Rhodia

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Design by Bella Bruk

Community Air Quality Tool Kit

The goal of the Community Air Quality Tool Kit is to assist community members who are concerned about their environment and are interested in being a positive force in changing it for the better.

In the tool kit you will find information, instructions, examples, and contacts to help you when communicating your environmental needs to local governmental agencies, industry, and your neighbors. You will notice that communication is the basic theme of this tool kit. Communication along with access to good information is the foundation to cleaner air and a healthy environment.

By using the information in this tool kit you will be able to

- make an effective air complaint to the appropriate agencies.
- have a say in the types of industry that come into your community.
- negotiate directly with industrial neighbors.
- know what to do in the case of an industrial emergency.
- get your neighbors involved in environmental concerns.
- influence elected officials.
- engage media in order to get your message out.

Table Of Contents

Making the Right Call How to make an effective air pollution complaint	pg. 5
We Mean Business Communicating with industry	pg. 7
Around the Neighborhood Getting involved in your community	pg. 9
Speak Up for Clean Air Making public comments to a government agency	pg. 11
The Buck Stops Here Communicating with your elected officials	pg. 13
Get the Word Out Communicating with media	pg. 17
Appendix A: Odor Log	pg. 21
Appendix B: Letters to the Editor	pg. 22
Appendix C: Glossary and Acronyms	pg. 23



Making the Right Call

CONCERN

When you go outside to check for mail you notice a strong odor that smells like rotten eggs. You don't see smoke, but this is the second time this week you smell the same odor. You wonder if anything is wrong and if anything is being done.

TAKE ACTION

In addition to their own inspectors, government agencies depend on community residents to be their eyes and ears when it comes to investigating pollution problems in a timely manner. That's why it is important for you to report pollution concerns directly to local air quality agencies to ensure that potential violations are properly investigated and addressed.

1. Before reporting an air pollution problem make sure you gather the necessary information including:
 - the nature of the problem, like smoke or odor.
 - the date and time of the problem. Make a note if it's an ongoing problem.
 - source of the problem if known.
2. If you live in a neighborhood where air quality problems are common, consider keeping an odor log. Write down all air pollution problems you experience, reported or not, in this log. It will be helpful in tracking your complaints. (See Odor Log in Appendix A)
3. Find the number for your local pollution control agency in either your city or county. Your state environmental agency, the Texas Commission for Environmental Quality (TCEQ), can also be called.
4. Once you have the information you need, make the call. You can start by calling 211, a statewide information resource. Numbers for other city and local agencies are listed below. You may be asked for your name, address and phone number. This is kept confidential and is necessary if you want to be contacted by an investigator. If there is a case number for your complaint, then make sure you write it down before you hang up.

Example: "I'm calling to file a complaint about the air. The air in my neighborhood smells like rotten eggs and it's making my eyes burn."

5. If you live in the vicinity of the Houston Ship Channel, you can also call the Community Awareness Emergency Response (CAER) Line at 281-476-2237 to report an odor regardless of the source. The odor network is a voluntary effort by local industry to help companies identify and eliminate industrial odor sources, and to provide you with an immediate means of alerting companies of odors in the air.

FURTHER ACTION

An investigator should be dispatched to look into the air quality incident within 24 hours. If an investigator calls to discuss your complaint, make sure to write down the investigator's name and your complaint number. If you don't get a call back within 24 hours, follow up on your complaint by calling the local agencies directly and ask to speak to an investigator. Make sure to document the dates and times of your calls and any results.

QUICK REFERENCE

City of Houston Complaints and Community Assistance: 3-1-1 (Ask for a case number)
Your call will be forwarded to the City of Houston Bureau of Air Quality Control (BAQC)

Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services (HCPHES): 713-920-2831

Galveston County: 409-938-2251

For Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Liberty, Montgomery and Waller Counties:
TCEQ Environmental Hotline: 888-777-3186

CAER Line: 281-476-2237

NOTES:



We Mean Business

Communicating with industry

CONCERN

You live near an industrial area and fear that their air pollution is affecting you and your family's health.

TAKE ACTION

It is critical for you to have an open line of communication with your industrial neighbors.

Sirens

Sirens are an important part of a company's emergency response system. Most facilities test their sirens on a weekly basis as a part of their safety plan. These are only drills, not actual emergency warnings. It's a good idea to be aware of the siren testing schedule in your area so that you know the difference. Call the companies near you to find out their schedule.

Community Advisory Panel

Community Advisory Panel (CAP) meetings were established throughout the region to improve communication between industry and residents. Most CAPs meet several times a year. During these meetings, industry representatives are on hand to give a report of any accidents or upsets at their facilities and answer questions from community members. Additionally, industry presents their annual emissions through the Toxic Release Inventory report in the late fall. CAP members can also request presentations from an array of government agencies and industry professionals in order to educate themselves on air quality topics. The only requirement to become a member of a CAP is to live in proximity to an industrial facility. To find out if there is a CAP in your area, contact your neighboring industrial companies or call Mothers for Clean Air at 713-528-3779.

In Case of Emergency

An accident or a natural catastrophe can cause an industrial area to experience heavy emissions, an explosion,

or other major incident. You must be prepared to take action to protect yourself and your family. If you hear an explosion or see a lot of smoke, it may be necessary to shelter-in-place to avoid harm.

Shelter-in-Place Guide

GO INSIDE. Take yourself and anyone near you, including pets, inside an enclosed structure, whether it is a house, business, garage, or vehicle. Close and lock all outside doors and windows (locking provides a tighter seal).

TURN OFF the ventilation or air conditioning system. Get into an interior room of the house with no or few windows and shut the door. If you are instructed to seal the room, use duct tape and plastic bags to seal cracks around the door into the room.

STAY TUNED. Turn on the TV or radio to a local station for important information about the emergency. Look for emergency broadcasts or instructions that may scroll at the bottom of the television screen. Emergency Alert System broadcasts are activated by local authorities when there is an emergency.

STAY OFF THE PHONE. Use your phone only for emergency calls. Keep your line open as much as possible. Emergency personnel may call you with specific instructions. Be prepared to evacuate if instructed to do so.

STAY INSIDE until you hear the “All Clear” message from local authorities.

Note : If you have children in school, do not try to pick them up. Teachers and other school staff have been trained on how to protect your children in the case of an emergency. If the school has been instructed to shelter-in-place, you will not be allowed to enter the school. This is for the protection of your children. Do not call the school. Remember, the school’s phone line must be kept open to receive important instructions from authorities.

FURTHER ACTION

As a community resident, you should feel free to contact industry whenever a question or concern comes up. At the meetings be sure to introduce yourself to the representative from the facility that affects you the most. Save their contact information for future reference. You may be invited to join a call list. In the event of an emergency or major event, some plants may call you directly with important information.



Around the Neighborhood

Getting involved in your community

CONCERN

You feel that not enough people in your community are aware of important environmental issues.

TAKE ACTION

There is power in numbers. By joining a civic organization in your community you can bring focus to air quality issues and get your neighbors to speak up for clean air. If you do not know of one where you live, call your city government and ask for the closest one.

Newsletters

Several civic clubs also publish newsletters which are distributed at meetings, delivered to residents or posted online. Sometimes you can also find neighborhood newsletters at the local library or community center. Ask your neighbors if there is one for your neighborhood. If not, suggest that your civic club start one and volunteer to help.

FURTHER ACTION

Start a discussion about air quality problems with other members of your community by sharing your personal experiences and this handbook. Volunteer to invite a speaker to your civic club to educate member residents about local air quality issues. Mothers for Clean Air (713-528-3779) or your city council member should be able to refer you to a qualified speaker.

NOTES:



Speak Up for Clean Air

Making public comments to a government agency

CONCERN

You have learned that a company near your home wants to build three new tanks on their property. However, you don't know what they will be storing and you are worried that this may have a negative impact on your health. How can you get more information and voice your concerns?

TAKE ACTION

Our state's environmental agency, the TCEQ, is the primary regulatory agency that oversees all aspects of the environment, including air quality.

Public Meetings

One way to communicate with the TCEQ is through public meetings. These meetings provide the public with an opportunity to learn about applications for environmental permits, ask questions of the applicant and the TCEQ, and offer formal comments. It also allows TCEQ staff to hear firsthand the concerns and objections of the community and gather input for use in the agency's consideration of the application.

Example: My name is Mary Smith. I have lived in the Magnolia neighborhood with my family for five years. I live within a mile of the applicant. Building three new tanks here will increase noise and traffic. It will also be an eyesore in the neighborhood and diminish my quality of life. I request that TCEQ deny this application.

The TCEQ may hold a public meeting if there is significant interest in an application, if requested by a legislator, or if otherwise required by law. You can find out about these meetings by watching the local newspaper for notices or sign up to be notified directly by requesting to be placed on the TCEQ mailing list. To do this you must send in a written request to the Office of Chief Clerk with your complete name and address.

Office of Chief Clerk, MC105

TCEQ

P.O. Box 13087

Austin, TX 78711-3087

Email: chiefclk@tceq.state.tx.us

Tips for Speakers

The following guidelines may be helpful if you would like to speak during a public meeting:

- Sign up to speak at the registration table.
- Sign up even if you don't speak so that you may receive updates from the agency.
- When it is your turn to speak, state your name, area where you reside, and any affiliation if applicable.
- There is usually a time limit so it is a good idea to prepare your comments in advance.
- Submit your comments in writing along with any supporting documentation or pictures.

Written Comments

In addition to the public meeting, individuals can usually submit written comments by mail or fax during the comment period set by TCEQ. Send your comments to the Office of Chief Clerk.

Comments may be faxed to the Office of Chief Clerk at 512-239-3311 no later than 5:00 p.m. on the last day of the comment period. However, the original must also be mailed or hand delivered to the Chief Clerk and received within three business days after faxing. Any written comment should include in the heading the permit number that is in question. Comments sent by e-mail will usually not be accepted by TCEQ.

FURTHER ACTION

Call the TCEQ Office of Public Assistance at 800-687-4040 for more information on the status of applications, public meeting procedures, and permitting issues for low income and minority communities.

QUICK REFERENCE

TCEQ Office of Chief Clerk:	512-239-3300 fax 512-239-3311
TCEQ Office of Public Assistance on Permitting:	800-687-4040

NOTES:



The Buck Stops Here

Communicating with your elected officials

CONCERN

You know that your elected officials work for you, but you don't know the best way to communicate with them.

TAKE ACTION

Different elected officials represent us at the local, state and national levels. They make decisions that affect our everyday lives. It is important that we communicate to them about what we think and what our communities need.

You have the right to communicate with elected officials that represent you. Your input can help officials learn more about an issue and understand how proposed ordinances and laws will affect you.

There are several reasons you may want to communicate with your elected officials.

- Thank them for something they have done.
- Ask them to take action on a certain issue or problem.
- Let them know how you feel about an issue.

Elected officials want and need to hear from you. There are several ways to communicate with your representatives.

- Write a letter.
- Make a phone call.
- Pay a visit.
- Speak at a meeting.

Letters

One of the best ways to let elected officials know what you think is to write a letter. Elected officials can be influenced by your feelings, thoughts, and stories. Your letter can be typed or handwritten. Just make sure it is easy to read. Include your return address so that your representative can respond.

Use formal address and salutation in the greeting of your letter.

Dear Council Member Smith
Dear Mayor Smith
Dear Governor Smith
Dear Representative Smith (state)
Dear Senator Smith (state)
Dear Honorable Smith (national) Dear President Smith

At the start of your letter, identify yourself and if appropriate state that you are writing as part of a community.

Example: My name is Mary Smith. I am a resident of Manchester and a member of Super Neighborhood #65.

In the next few sentences briefly describe your situation and why you are writing. It is important to make the letter personal. Be polite but direct.

Example: I am writing to urge you to help strengthen laws to clean the air in Houston. I have three children. Their health is very important to me. I am afraid that without good laws industry will continue to put harmful chemicals into our air.

Ask for action. Let the elected official know what you would like him or her to do and ask for a response. If you are writing about a certain legislative bill, make sure you include the bill number. A House bill will have a number like HB 1234 and a Senate bill will have a number like SB 1234.

To find out about specific bill numbers and whether it is in the House or Senate, call your state legislature or U.S. Congress:

Texas: 512-463-1252 or visit www.capitol.state.tx.us
United States: 202-225-1772 or visit www.congress.org

If you communicate by e-mail, do not include attachments. In the subject line, include the bill number and indicate who you are.

Example of subject line in email: RE: SE Houston resident for HB 1234

Telephone Calls

Telephone calls are a good way to communicate if you need to make your point quickly. For example, you may want to tell your elected official how you feel about a bill that is about to be voted on.

Many of the guidelines for letters apply to telephone calls as well.

- When you call, first state your name and where you are calling from.
- Ask to speak to the elected official. There is a good chance that you will end up speaking to a staff member. Ask for the staffer who is the point person for your issue.
- State your point right away. Be brief and be clear about how you want your representative to act. If you are calling about a bill, know the bill number.
- Be prepared to support your point if asked to do so.

Personal visits

Meeting with an elected official is a good way to communicate on a personal level. It makes the point that real people like you are interested in the choices that are made about your city, state or country.

Call your elected official's office and schedule a meeting time. Provide your name, contact information, and the purpose of the meeting. Note if others will be joining you at the meeting. If you are not able to meet with the elected official in person, you should ask to meet with the staff person that is responsible for your issue. Meeting with the appropriate staff person can oftentimes be just as influential as meeting with the actual elected official.

Tips for Meeting with an Elected Official

You can organize and conduct an effective meeting by following a few simple tips.

- If you are going with other people, choose a spokesperson. Make sure you all agree on what he or she should say, and what points should be stressed by others in the group.
- Get right to the point. In your first few sentences say why you are there. Be brief, simple and straightforward.
- If the elected official asks you a question that you do not know the answer to, say that you will find the answer and get back to him or her.
- Put together a one-page summary of your main points ahead of time. Leave this with the elected official at the conclusion of your meeting.

Local Meetings

A good way to communicate with your elected officials on a local level is to go to meetings you know they will attend. Town hall meetings, commissioners' court and city council meetings give residents the chance to speak up. To speak at a council meeting, you may need to call ahead of time and sign up to speak. When you call to register to speak, give your name, who you are representing, and what you plan to speak about.

Example: My name is Mary Smith. I am a resident of Magnolia Park and I want to tell the council about my concern with the idling semi-trucks in my neighborhood.

During your speech, state your point right away. There may be a time limit, so keep that in mind.

Another way to focus on a local issue is to have an elected official come to you. For example, if you're concerned about the lack of sidewalks in your neighborhood, you might want to invite the elected official to visit. That way the official can see firsthand the needs of your community.

FURTHER ACTION

The most basic and powerful way to communicate with elected officials is through your vote. If you are registered to vote, here are some things to remember:

- Keep your registration card current. Even if you don't move, your registration card does expire. If your card has expired and you have not received a new one in the mail, contact your local registrar.
- Keep your registration card in a place where you can find it.
- Participate in all elections. Your vote is important. Elections in Texas take place in November and March with additional elections in case of a run-off.

If you have never voted or are a new citizen consider starting now. To be eligible to register to vote in, you must

- be a U.S. citizen.
- have proof of residency in your county.
- be 17 years and 10 months of age.
- not be in prison, on probation, or on parole.

You can register to vote by picking up a registration application at the post office, the driver's license office or at your local county registrar or tax office.

If you have any questions about registering or voting, you can contact the Texas Secretary of State at 800-252-VOTE (8683) or go to www.sos.state.tx.us/elections.

Get the Word Out

Communicating with media

CONCERN

You feel you have a compelling story that others should hear. This will help you communicate your concerns to your community, but you don't know how to reach out to media.

TAKE ACTION

Many people have the opinion that if they don't see something on television, hear it on the radio, or read it in the paper, it didn't happen. Media can be a good source of information, but also a good resource to get your message out. Your words and messages, conveyed through the media, can educate and motivate many people at once. There are several ways you can engage media to champion issues that are important to you.

Newspaper

Talking to a reporter - When you read the paper, make note of the reporters covering stories that deal with your issue. For the Houston Chronicle news desk call 713-362-7491 and ask for his or her contact information. You can also find this information at www.chron.com.

When you call or e-mail the reporter:

- Mention an article the reporter has written that dealt with an issue you are concerned about, like the environment.
- Offer to be a resource. Let the reporter know how environmental problems are affecting you and your neighborhood.
- Volunteer to be interviewed. Think ahead of time about your statement so that your message is clear.

Writing a letter to the editor - Letters to the editor are an easy way for you to voice your opinion and educate readers about the issues that concern you. By following a few guidelines you could soon see your letter in print.

- Read the letters to the editor, so you become familiar with the type of letter that the paper prints.

- Be timely. Capitalize on recent news and events.
- Demonstrate how this issue affects you locally.
- Make sure your letter is short, 250 words or less, and to the point (see Appendix B).
- Sign your letter. Include your name, address, day and evening phone numbers.
- Email your letter to the Houston Chronicle to viewpoints@chron.com or to your local newspaper.
- Find others to write letters when possible. This will show that other individuals in the community are concerned about the same issue.

Talk Radio

Getting your message out on a local talk radio show can educate the public on your issue or challenge listeners to mobilize around an upcoming event. Keep in mind some points that can help make your call an effective one:

- Listen to the show you want to call ahead of time to get an idea of the host's personality.
- When you call, be prepared for busy signals or being put on hold. Don't give up. When you do get through, give the operator your name.
- Lead off with your most compelling fact or statistic, and then elaborate. Repeat the idea you are responding to so that the audience tuned in will know what you are talking about.

Example: The number one reason children are admitted to Houston emergency rooms is asthma. I agree with your statement that air pollution affects our children's health....

Close your call by inspiring action and giving a phone number or Web site that people can contact for more information. You can reference Mothers for Clean Air's Web site: www.mothersforcleanair.org.

Local Stations with Call-in Shows

KPFT 90.1 FM is a local, community based radio station that has a multitude of call-in shows throughout the day on different topics. To find out what show highlights your issue or concern you can call KPFT at 713-526-4000. A list of all the radio shows with a description is posted on www.kpft.org.

KTRH 740 AM is a news and talk radio station with a local call-in show. To find out about the schedule, call 713-212-8000 or find it on www.ktrh.com.

FURTHER ACTION

If you feel that you have been affected by poor air quality, you can volunteer to be a media spokesperson for your community. Groups such as Mothers for Clean Air receive requests from newspaper and TV reporters for residents to tell their stories. Call 713-528-3779 to volunteer.

QUICK REFERENCE

Houston Chronicle	713-362-7491 phone viewpoints@chron.com
Baytown Sun	281-422-8302 phone 281-427-6283 fax
Brazoria Facts	979-265-2223 phone 979-265-9052 fax
Galveston County Daily News	409-683-5239
Houston Community Newspapers	hconline@hconline.com
KPFT 90.1 FM	713-526-4000
KTRH 740 AM	713-212-8000

Appendix B: Letters to the Editor



You may want to write a letter to the editor for several reasons.

1. To argue points made generally in an article or editorial:

Example: I did not agree with the editorial “Going Green Cuts Jobs.” Other cities that have toughened their stance on pollution have seen these efforts lead to economic prosperity and a better quality of life. Houston can do the same.

2. To highlight a positive event in the community:

Example: Runners took the message of clean air to the streets of Houston this weekend at the Mothers for Clean Air Earth Day 5K. It was great to see so many people come out to enjoy this family event and bring awareness to an issue that affects all of us.

3. To credit someone for excellent work:

Example: Mayor Bill White should be commended for his courageous fight to force local industry to reduce toxic emissions. I live near the ship channel. I know the mayor’s efforts can make a huge difference in the quality of the air we breathe.

Whatever your reason, write simply and clearly and follow the instructions given by the newspaper.

Appendix C: Glossary and Acronyms



BAQC - Bureau of Air Quality Control is the Houston agency that keeps track of local air quality and is responsible for responding to residents' environmental concerns inside the City of Houston. The agency conducts monitoring activities, investigates emissions, and enforces local air quality laws. 3-1-1

CAER line - Community Awareness Emergency Response line is a phone number that residents can call to receive information about participating industries and report odors 24 hours a day. (281) 476-2237

CAPS - Community Advisory Panels provide a forum for industry and neighboring residents to report activities and discuss concerns.

EAS - Emergency Alert System is used by authorities to broadcast information and instructions on the radio and television during an emergency.

EHCMA - East Harris County Manufacturers Association is a business association of major petrochemical industries around the ship channel. They sponsor the CAER line.

Emissions - waste gases, vapors, small particles or other substances discharged into the air.

EPA - Environmental Protection Agency is the national agency in charge of protecting human health and the environment.

Flaring - the use of open flames during normal and/or emergency operations to combust hazardous materials; it may operate continuously or intermittently, and is usually on top of a stack.

Hazard - object, physical effect, or a condition with potential to harm people, property or the environment.

HCPHES - Harris County Public Health and Environmental Services is the agency that handles air quality issues outside the city limits. (713) 920-2831

Release - a substance discharged into the air (see emissions).

Risk - measure of likelihood of occurrence of an undesirable event and of potentially adverse consequences.

Shelter-in-Place - actions individuals should take to protect self and family during a major industrial accident.

TCEQ - Texas Commission on Environmental Quality

TRI - The Toxic Release Inventory is a publicly available EPA database that contains information on toxic chemical releases reported annually by certain industry groups.

Upsets - unauthorized emissions that are potentially harmful to the public.

