

# Finding Solutions Through Policy Change

A number of environmental factors can trigger asthma attacks in children who already have asthma. Some environmental factors play a role in the onset of asthma in otherwise healthy people.

“People deserve healthy homes and school environments. Requirements for healthy air inside schools together with the establishment and enforcement of healthy housing regulations may be the most effective way to control asthma.”

— Dorothy Vura-Weis, MD, MPH, Family Physician, San Mateo County Health System, Chair of the San Mateo County Asthma Coalition



**Community Action to Fight Asthma (CAFA)** is a network of asthma coalitions in California shaping local, regional, and state policies to reduce the environmental triggers of asthma for school-aged children where they live, learn, and play. The CAFA Network mobilizes asthma advocates from across California, reaching the rural areas of the Central Valley, the urban areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco, and many areas in between.

Asthma is the most common chronic childhood disease in the U.S. and affects 1 in 6 children in California. While scientists continue to explore what causes asthma, it is clear that some environmental factors, such as environmental tobacco smoke and ozone, play a role in the onset of asthma in otherwise healthy people. Additionally, we know that a number of environmental factors, including mold, animal hair, diesel pollution, and dust mites, can trigger asthma attacks in children who already have asthma, leading to preventable emergency-room visits, hospitalizations, and even death. Therefore, the CAFA Network has chosen to focus its efforts on policies that can systematically reduce exposure to these harmful environmental factors.

## CAFA's Focus on Policy Change

CAFA's asthma coalitions bring together health-care providers, school personnel, environmental health and justice groups, public health organizations, and community residents to collectively address the problem of asthma in California's communities. Members use their experience solving local challenges to determine CAFA's state policy priorities, develop advocacy strategies, and put these strategies into action. CAFA also joins forces with other key allies across the state in collaborative efforts to shape environmental and health policies.

## CAFA's Framework for Policy Action in Schools and Homes, and on Outdoor Air

### Improve indoor air quality in classrooms and other school facilities

Children spend much of their day inside schools. Many classrooms have problems with mold, poor ventilation, pesticides, and other hazards, which can trigger asthma attacks. Many

schools across the country and in California have poor-quality indoor air and other conditions that contribute to a poor-quality indoor environment. Identifying asthma triggers in schools and working systematically to eliminate them can help reduce the frequency and intensity of asthma attacks. Suggested policies to improve school environments, including indoor air quality, include the following:

- Increasing resources for school facility maintenance and repair. The first line of defense in providing a healthy school environment is proper maintenance and repair. Without adequate funding, even schools with the best policies and most skilled staff will fall short of their health goals.
- Requiring schools to implement Indoor Air Quality (IAQ) maintenance and prevention practices, including promoting asthma-friendly cleaning products, environmentally preferable purchasing, and integrated pest management procedures.
- Addressing the issue of mold: for example, schools need resources and training to help navigate a mold-remediation process. Having protective and enforceable mold standards also helps.
- Promoting the healthy construction and renovation of school facilities by using best practices such as those offered by the Collaborative for High Performing Schools.
- Reducing exposure to poor-quality outdoor air by requiring schools to notify staff and students and restrict outdoor activities on days when air quality is poor; by establishing clear buffer zones between schools and pollution sources such as busy roadways; by enforcing vehicle-idling laws; and by maintaining or increasing funding for clean bus fleets.
- Supporting the implementation of asthma and chronic-disease management plans, which would involve training school nurses and organizing asthma education for students, teachers, and staff.

### Improve air quality in homes

On average, California adults and children spend nearly 90% of their time during the week indoors, and most of this time is in the home. Children can be exposed to many asthma trig-

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gers in their homes. The presence of uncontrolled environmental triggers causes irritation to the lungs and can lead to the development and exacerbation of asthma as well as allergies and other health-threatening conditions.

While individual families can reduce triggers in their homes, many indoor air problems can be prevented through health-protective policies. For example, only policy change can establish construction standards that ensure the use of healthy building materials and the installation of proper ventilation in homes, or mandate adequate code enforcement that protects renters from unhealthy living conditions. Policy changes to systematically improve housing affordability and housing conditions, especially among renters, are a key step toward reducing the problem of asthma. Some specific ideas are listed below:

- Improving state health and habitability standards related to mold, pests, indoor air quality, etc., including establishing standards for the assessment and remediation of mold in response to complaints.
- Improving local and state support for code enforcement, such as training and adopting a policy of proactive housing code inspections.
- Increasing penalties, including fines and criminal penalties, for housing code violations, especially targeting landlords who are repeat offenders.
- Ensuring that “green” building standards are also healthy building standards for new construction and renovation.
- Increasing resources to rehabilitate substandard housing.
- Establishing health standards for locating new housing (including proper mitigation when building near sources of pollution is unavoidable) and limiting the expansion of roads, rails, and other pollution sources near existing housing.
- Increasing state resources for affordable housing development.
- Ensuring that land-use decisions support the production of affordable housing.

### Improve outdoor air quality related to asthma triggers

Outdoor air pollution is a serious problem across California. Today nearly all Californians (about 99 percent) live in areas

that fail to meet the state’s health-based ozone and/or particulate matter standards. Every year millions of pounds of dangerous chemicals, gases, and particles are released into the air by vehicles, power plants, and factories, and they have serious effects on our health. Establishing policies that reduce exposure to diesel and other outdoor air pollution would go a long way toward improving children’s health. Suggested policies to improve outdoor air quality related to asthma triggers include the following:

- Reducing diesel emissions, including supporting efforts that ensure small businesses are able to comply with stronger regulations.
- Developing and implementing state, air district, and port emission-reduction plans in order to dramatically reduce pollution from the freight transportation system.
- Implementing strong regulations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Increasing temperatures lead to higher levels of ozone and other health-damaging conditions.
- Supporting expedient attainment of the regional 8-hour ozone and PM<sub>2.5</sub> State and National Ambient Air Quality Standards.
- Adopting regional wood-burning restrictions and ordinances.
- Adopting land-use policies that protect public health, such as smart growth principles that minimize sources of pollutants—particularly diesel emissions—from rail yards, ports, distribution centers, and truck routes.
- Implementing standards that promote the use of new and emerging non-polluting technologies.
- Relocating industrial facilities away from residential neighborhoods.

The success of such efforts depends upon the support and participation of policy makers, health professionals, environmental justice groups, community residents, and anyone concerned about asthma. Please go to our website at [www.rampasthma.org](http://www.rampasthma.org) to learn more about Community Action to Fight Asthma, connect with local coalitions, locate asthma resources across California, and sign up for our e-newsletter.