Tips for Difficult Conversations

Climate change remains a controversial and political issue in many Oregon communities. Making science-based arguments does not always work within a values-based conversation. For this reason, some local health jurisdictions advise focusing on the role of public health to prepare and protect our communities, regardless of whether someone accepts that climate change is occurring. This is also reflected in the George Mason University study on climate change communications.

Below are a few sample responses that may help you through difficult conversations. We also recommend the www.talkingclimate.org for more guidance.

CLAIM: Climate change isn't happening

RESPONSE: Regardless of whether climate change is happening or not, it is our responsibility to prepare communities for weather-related disasters. The great thing about this work is that it can help us improve our public health system so that we are prepared in times of emergency, whether or not that emergency is caused by changes in our climate.

CLAIM: Climate change isn't caused by human activity

RESPONSE: Whether climate change is caused by humans or not, we have a responsibility to protect our community's public health and safety. This work gives us an opportunity to ask how we can do things better and what is needed to build communities that are more resilient to natural hazards and other challenges that could arise in the future.

CLAIM: Trying to address climate change is a waste of resources/time

RESPONSE: There are currently very little resources invested in these efforts. Much of what our health department does helps to monitor and assess health risks related to climate hazards. Integrating more climate considerations helps us improve what we already do, by looking into the future and planning for more uncertainties. As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"…by preparing for future challenges, we can save valuable time and resources in the long run.

CLAIM: Health effects in Oregon won't happen for a very long time

RESPONSE: Heat waves during the summer months result in an increase of heat-related hospitalizations. We also know that the incidence of wildfire is going up and that more people are being exposed to poorer air quality because of it.

It's true that other parts of the world may be hit harder by certain impacts, such as hurricanes and sea level rise, but there is no place on the planet that can avoid impacts all together. Oregon's leading climatologists project that extreme weather events will likely occur more often and be more severe in the decades to come. We are responding to this information by considering how we might improve our public health systems to prepare for potential challenges ahead.