

# Closing Health Disparities in the U.S. Pacific Islands

Guest Editorial by Ferdinand Aranza, Director, Office of Insular Affairs, U.S. Department of the Interior  
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Hidden within the aggregate data customarily collected on AAPIs are numbers that reveal surprising lags in the health and well-being of people residing in the Pacific Basin. Higher infant mortality, lower life spans, higher fertility, and sky-high rates of diabetes and other chronic diseases among middle-aged adults are some of the indicators that fall on the shady side of the American norm. Others are rapid population growth, lower educational levels, depressed incomes, and double-digit unemployment. Infant mortality rates in American Samoa, for example, are almost twice as great as the U.S. average, while per capita income is less than one quarter the U.S. average.

For many Pacific Islanders, the road to health equity is strewn with potholes and obstacles. Those who live in American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam know that their remoteness from Hawaii and the U.S. mainland creates enormous barriers that transcend geographic distance. Better access to health services and trained professionals, though extremely important, is only part of the solution.

To succeed, the goal of improved health for Pacific Islanders requires the creation of multifaceted opportunities in and outside the traditional realm of health care. It also entails a reorientation to issues that vary considerably from stateside experience, and the development of supportive policies to help overcome isolation.

Sustainable economic development is key. Pacific Islanders understand all too well that their livelihoods and well-being are extremely vulnerable to global environmental and economic forces that are beyond their control. Natural disasters often take a particularly heavy toll on their islands' finite resources and fragile ecosystems, and recovering from super typhoons and hurricanes takes years. Islands like Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, for example, are within the "typhoon belt." It is not unusual for their communities to experience two or three typhoons a year, often with winds of over 100 m.p.h. Resources that would ordinarily go to supporting health care instead must be spent on rebuilding. Unresolved land use disputes and the negative effects of changes in foreign markets and terms of trade worsen the problem. Indeed, the impact seems disproportionately large in comparison to the small size of the islands.

In recognition of these and other compelling issues, President Clinton established the Interagency Group on Insular Affairs (IGIA) by Executive Memorandum on August 9, 1999.

By so doing, he formalized a mechanism to bring together senior officials from throughout the federal government to work with the Secretary of the Interior, to clarify the concerns of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, and Guam, as well as those of their Caribbean counterpart, the U.S. Virgin Islands. The IGIA seeks to improve cross-cutting policy coordination, increase Federal responsiveness to insular area issues, and recommend policy and program remedies to the President.

As a first step the IGIA, in consultation with island leadership, has focused its attention on areas that promote sustainable growth consistent with the sound management of natural and fiscal resources, and on improving the general welfare of the islands to be on par with U.S. health, social, and economic indicators. The IGIA

has also developed a comprehensive inventory of Federal regulatory, financial, and technical assistance programs for which the territories are eligible but do not now participate.

Issue clusters provide the IGIA with a roadmap for closer interdepartmental collaboration to address follow-up items, and lay out the framework for the work that remains. Broadly, these include economic planning and trade mission assistance, tax incentives, immigration and visa issues, job training assistance, budget and management controls, and new economic initiatives. The improvement of statistical capacity, land usage, solid and wastewater management, environmental hazard mitigation and clarification of disaster assistance round out the clusters.

Over the next few months, the IGIA will bring closure to as many of these issues as possible by engaging insular area representatives in discussions and negotiations with federal officials. It will not be alone in that effort. The IGIA's work to create a supportive and effective policy environment for the Pacific insular areas, is fully complemented by the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. These two interlinked groups create a synergy that will forward the health agenda of Pacific Islanders. Working together, these groups can ensure that health-making opportunities not only exist temporarily, but are created for many years to come.

*For more information on the IGIA, visit the Office of Insular Affairs  
Web site: <http://www.doi.gov/oia>. ❖*

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