

Working Toward Our Goal

Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health

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It has been one year since more than 2,000 of you came to Washington, D.C., to take part in an historic event—the first *National Leadership Summit on Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health*.

We are undertaking a department-wide effort to address racial and ethnic disparities in health and have made the elimination of health disparities one of our top priorities.

We have many activities underway and more planned to help us reach our goal. The Leadership Summit was an important step, and I was happy to see so many people committed to ending health care disparities. These problems, however, cannot be solved simply by government. It will take the providers, the communities, the houses of worship—institutions and individuals across our society—working together to end disparities.

Building on the momentum from last year's conference, we continue to focus on six health concerns for communities of color today: infant mortality, cancer screening and management, heart disease and stroke, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and child and adult immunizations. We also focus on factors such as access to health care and quality of health care. To tackle disparities, we have developed strategies that will require your support, if they are to be successful.

Shortly after last year's conference, the Department, in partnership with the ABC Radio Networks, launched a national event—*Take A Loved One to the Doctor Day*—as a part of our *Closing the Health Gap* health education and information campaign for communities of color.

The 2002 event was targeted primarily toward African Americans. More than 400 organizations, as well as elected officials and celebrities from across the nation, banded together to raise awareness of health disparities and encourage community action to get people to take a loved one to the doctor or another health professional.

This year, our partnership continues, and the campaign is now expanded to include American Indians and Alaska Natives, Asian Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Native Hawaiians, and other Pacific Islanders. So, this year on September 16th, you are encouraged to organize a health event, attend a health event in your community, or help a friend, neighbor, or family member to take charge of their health by visiting a doctor, nurse, dentist, physician assistant, or other health professional. That's just one way you personally can help close the health gap.

In March 2003, Secretary Thompson convened a national health summit to call on all Americans to take the steps that will lead to a healthier nation. The *Steps to a HealthierUS: Putting Prevention First* summit was attended by more than 1,000 community leaders, policy makers, health officials, and others. It laid out the Department's priorities and programs for *Steps to a HealthierUS*, focusing attention on the importance of prevention and promising approaches for promoting healthy environments.

The Department also launched a new adult immunization initiative—Racial and Ethnic Adult Disparities in Immunization Initiative (READII)—to reduce racial and ethnic disparities in influenza and pneumococcal vaccination coverage for adults 65 years of age and older, focusing on African American and Hispanic communities.

In addition to our partnerships and prevention initiatives, HHS is putting additional resources into direct patient care. President Bush asked the Department to increase the number of community health centers across the country to reach individuals who lack access to quality medical care. As a result, HHS is expanding the current nationwide network of more than 3,300 health center sites that serve some 11 million low-income people, a large proportion of whom are from communities of color.

Many of the innovative ideas shared during the Leadership Summit and *Steps to a HealthierUS* are being implemented or supported by the Department.

Yet, to solve the crisis of health disparities, we need to continue to work collectively and think outside of the box. Each of us must work in our own communities to come up with real solutions to eliminate health disparities. It starts in our own homes with our own families and with a renewed sense of personal responsibility.

As promised, this expanded issue of *Closing the Gap* is the second and final part of our reporting on last year's Leadership Summit. I hope that you will find ideas in this issue that will stimulate further thinking and help advance your work on health disparities.

We at the Department of Health and Human Services will do our part to provide individuals, families, and communities with the resources they need to eliminate health disparities. Let me assure you we are committed to this effort and to undertaking the actions necessary to reach our goal.

Good health to all!

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