

# VITAL SIGNS

Perspectives of the president of APHA

## Safer housing: A key step to overcoming health disparities

**I**N OUR efforts to eliminate health disparities, creating safe and healthy homes remains a key area. Most people spend about 90 percent of their time indoors, where unhealthy and unsafe conditions can increase the risk for disease, injury and premature death.

Residents of substandard housing are at increased risk for many adverse health outcomes, including lead poisoning, rodent bites and injuries from fires, falls and electricity. In the past decade, public health programs that have focused on eliminating lead hazards in housing have led to a major public health success story, namely a dramatic reduction in childhood blood lead levels. Similar improvements in housing conditions have benefited children who are at risk for asthma episodes and other medical conditions.

A comprehensive, holistic and systems approach to the health and safety-related problems of substandard housing is more efficient and effective than a categorical approach. Some would like to see a single agency with ultimate responsibility. However, health and housing will always span several agencies. We need a commitment to improve collaboration within and among health, housing and environmental agencies and organizations at the federal, state and local levels. The integration of housing, health and environmental activities offers agencies an opportunity to improve practice and service delivery while achieving program efficiencies, which is especially important during tight budget times.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development are strongly promoting the "Healthy Homes Initiative." This has led the way to establishing the National Healthy Homes

Training Center and Network. Its purpose is to encourage public health and housing programs to address housing deficiencies and health hazards.

Environmental health practitioners, public health nurses, housing specialists and others are being cross-trained to build their capacity and competency across multiple disciplines.

The Healthy Homes Initiative promotes:

- ◆ the use of research to determine causal relations between housing and health and safety;
- ◆ the collection of local data to define problems and monitor progress toward reducing or eliminating housing deficiencies and hazards;
- ◆ the development of guidelines to assess, identify and reduce or eliminate risks; and
- ◆ the identification and implementation of low-cost, reliable and practical solutions to housing deficiencies.

The alliance between CDC and HUD is an excellent example of government working together to promote healthy housing. Their leadership in this effort, nevertheless, is only a first step.

APHA is calling for an even broader national agenda that encourages state, local and tribal governments to develop and — more importantly — fund a systematic approach that provides healthy and safe housing for all residents. Only through such comprehensive work can we adequately address our goal of eliminating health disparities for all. ■



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## National Public Health Week news

### APHA survey: Older Americans face barriers to staying healthy

**A**MERICANS older than age 55 know how to protect their health with strategies such as regular exercise and a proper diet, yet older adults face a number of barriers when it comes to taking the necessary steps to improve their health, according to an APHA survey released during National Public Health Week in April.

"At a point when Americans are living much longer, research shows that simple lifestyle changes can help ensure a healthier future," said APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP.

The survey found that half of older adults believe they are living a healthy lifestyle, while half recognize they need to make changes to improve their health. A lack of motiva-

tion, followed closely by money and time, were cited as primary barriers to taking action toward protecting health. Also, Americans ages 75 and older are more likely than their younger peers to say they are living a healthy lifestyle — 67 percent for those ages 75 and older, compared to 35 percent of those ages 55–64.

Benjamin said the survey results underscore the need to invest in public education, community-based programs and environmental policy interventions so the health care system can better serve the needs of the aging population.

In addition to their lifestyles, survey participants were also asked about attitudes on the state of health care in the

United States. Twenty-eight percent of respondents ranked health care as their top concern for the country — well ahead of the war in Iraq, the economy and terrorism. Also, 61 percent of older adults surveyed said the cost of health care is of particular concern, followed by 22 percent who cited quality and 14 percent who noted access as a main problem.

During National Public Health Week, APHA recommended that all Americans adopt the "three Ps" to living healthy lives: prevent problems from happening, protect health through early detection and plan to stay healthy for years to come.

Coverage of National Public Health Week events from around the country will be published in the next issue of *The Nation's Health*.

More information on the survey and healthy aging is available online at <[www.apha.org/nphw](http://www.apha.org/nphw)>. ■

## APHA Executive Board holds conference call in March

### Rodriguez-Trias award for social justice to be given

**A** NEW APHA award that honors public health workers who have advanced social justice will be presented for the first time this year.

Created in 2001 by the Governing Council, the Helen Rodriguez-Trias Social Justice Award recognizes someone who has distinguished her or himself professionally through work that has improved the public's health by empowering disenfranchised communities, helping to eliminate health disparities or influencing public policies that lead to a more equitable distribution of resources.

The award is named after Helen Rodriguez-Trias, MD, a pediatrician who was well-known as a tireless health advocate, particularly for women and children. Rodriguez-Trias, who died in 2001, was APHA president in 1993 and served on the Executive Board from 1992–1994.

Nominations are now being accepted for the award, which will be presented during the 133rd APHA Annual Meeting.

Complete award criteria

and a nomination form is available on the APHA Web site at <[www.apha.org/sections/awards](http://www.apha.org/sections/awards)>. Completed forms and nomination information should be sent to: Award Nominations, c/o Deborah Dillard, APHA, 800 I St., N.W., Washington, DC 20001-3710 or e-mailed to <[deborah.dillard@apha.org](mailto:deborah.dillard@apha.org)>. All nominations must be submitted by May 31.

While the Rodriguez-Trias award was created more than three years ago, APHA had held off on presenting the award while fundraising was under way. At the recommendation of APHA's executive director, the Executive Board authorized that the award move forward this year.

## Executive Board holds conference call

The Executive Board discussed the award and other APHA business during its March 14 conference call meeting. Among its other business, the board tabled a request to create a new Caucus on family violence prevention until its May meeting.

Additionally, the board

confirmed that Washington, D.C., will be the site of the 2011 APHA Annual Meeting. While the Association adopted an internal operational policy in November specifying that future Annual Meetings be held in smoke-free cities — and D.C. is not yet smoke-free — the contract for the 2011 Annual Meeting was already under negotiation at the time, according to T.J. McCabe, APHA's director of convention services.

APHA members, leaders and staff are working to ensure that D.C. becomes a smoke-free city before 2007, when the next APHA Annual Meeting will be held in the city. In support of efforts under way in D.C., APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP, sent a letter to the chair of the Council of the District of Columbia recently urging policymakers to pass legislation that will make D.C. smoke-free. (See story, Page 9.)

Summaries of actions taken during board meetings can be accessed with an APHA member password at <[www.apha.org/private/execboard](http://www.apha.org/private/execboard)>. ■