

Executive Summary

In September 2004, the New Jersey Legislature authorized the Commissioner of the Department of Health and Senior Services (the Department) to establish the *Eliminating Health Disparities Initiative* in the Office on Minority and Multicultural Health (OMMH). Public Law 2004, c. 137, required the OMMH to develop and implement a comprehensive, coordinated plan to improve the health of racial and ethnic minorities within the State. In New Jersey, as in the rest of the nation, health disparities are deep, persistent and complex.

The *Eliminating Health Disparities Initiative* provides an opportunity to examine the Department's programs that target specific minority populations, identifies strengths of the Department's programs and proposes new strategies. The NJDHSS Plan to Eliminate Health Disparities (the Plan) is the Department's strategy book on a comprehensive and targeted effort to address some of the major issues that contribute to racial and ethnic health disparities in New Jersey.

In addition to examining the Department's model programs, the Plan summarizes the Department's efforts to improve its capacity to address health disparities as part of its ongoing activities. The Plan creates a synergistic approach by supporting intradepartmental collaboration specifically on eliminating health disparities. The NJDHSS Health Disparities Work Group examined existing programs and initiatives addressing health disparities, which provided the basis for the Plan and formalized the Department's efforts to build on successful initiatives to address health disparities. The Plan delineates overall progress through goals, action plans and outcome measures.

The Plan maintains its focus in certain priority areas of medical emphasis that disproportionately impact minority communities and are identified in the legislation: asthma, breast, cervical, colorectal and prostate cancer, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, HIV disease, infant mortality and unintentional injuries. In addition, the Plan addresses the impact of obesity on the health of minority populations. Succeeding versions of the

Plan will focus on other priority health areas including: kidney disease, hepatitis C, sexually transmitted infections, immunizations, and violence.

The specific areas of internal development that the Plan focuses on are improving the standards for collecting and reporting race/ethnicity data; increasing the availability of culturally and linguistically sensitive materials and services; increasing minorities in management positions; enhancing community outreach; and increasing programs that exemplify promising practices.

The NJDHSS recognizes that disparities result from a complex set of factors including education, environment, gender, income and other socioeconomic factors, and behavioral patterns. There is also growing evidence that provider behavior, including a lack of cultural competency, contributes to disparities in care. While some information on the contributing factors to this problem is known, more research and documentation of outcomes is required to appropriately institute policies and programs that will help close the gaps in health care access and quality that are persistent.

Developing an agenda for addressing health disparities is challenging and requires funding and resources. In addition to state and federal aid, NJDHSS continues to seek funding from private foundations and other sources to support new health disparities initiatives. Next steps include creating a process that involves community partners, funders, advocates and health care professionals to implement the Plan.

While the Plan projects a strategic approach to addressing health disparities over the next three years, the recommendation is that these strategies continue to be re-examined and re-evaluated during and even beyond the three-year implementation period. The Plan should be treated as a working document, such that it will continue to evolve, expand and be updated with the most current information and resources that can contribute to eliminating health disparities.