

## D. Strengthening the Infrastructure: Community Outreach

Empowering communities with information to more effectively participate in decision making about their health care is an important component of addressing health disparities. Minority community-based organizations, including faith-based groups, can be effective in conducting campaigns or outreach efforts that are culturally competent. These organizations are also well positioned to build communication networks that aim to reach minority communities. Public health messages must be consistent and credible and must take into account the specific characteristics of the targeted audience.

Outreach workers and patient navigators are also key in disseminating information, linking patients to care and systems of support, and navigating complicated health care systems. Individuals who may have directly or indirectly experienced biased treatment from health care providers based on their race, ethnicity, gender, language spoken, values or beliefs may be hesitant to return to these systems of care even when their health is threatened. Outreach workers who come from minority communities and who have established relationships within these communities can engender the trust needed to effectively reach those disenfranchised patients. Another area where outreach services can be of benefit is in reaching the homeless population. The lack of permanent shelter, transportation and telephone services are significant barriers to accessing health care.<sup>iv</sup> The New Jersey Community Health Worker Institute, a project of New Jersey Area Health Education Centers (AHEC), an affiliate program of the University of Medicine & Dentistry of New Jersey-School of Osteopathic Medicine is developing a plan for training community health workers and reimbursing their work.

In addition, the NJDHSS must reach out to community leaders and other public health stakeholders to enhance the health disparities agenda. The Federal Office of Minority Health is launching a National Action Agenda to End Health Disparities for Racial and Ethnic Minority Populations. Their mission is to work with individuals and organizations to create a nation free of health disparities, with quality health outcomes for all.

## *Building on Success*

- The Office of Minority and Multicultural Health funds minority community-based organizations that include community health workers who provide outreach information to minority communities that make linkages to needed services for diabetes and asthma.
- Annually in September, the OMMH promotes Minority and Multicultural Health Month, helping to raise awareness of minority health issues and highlight the efforts of community and faith-based organizations, hospitals and other institutions.
- The OMMH supports the South Asian Health Project (SAHP), which increases awareness of the health concerns within the South Asian community in New Jersey. SAHP fosters meaningful relationships with the South Asian community and ethnic media to conduct outreach and promote health and wellness.
- The Immigration and American Citizenship Organization (IACO) provides health and prevention information and promotes Department services among difficult to reach Latino immigrants.

**Goal: Support new and maintain established partnerships with community-based organizations, including faith-based groups, advocacy groups, and agencies that have minority health agendas to maximize outreach and increase awareness of health disparities.**

## *Action Plan:*

### *Steps and Timeline:*

*FY 2007-2010*

- Initiate the OMMH Empowering Communities with Health Information Project, EMCHIP, which will fund at least five community-based organizations to conduct community education workshops to equip those at greatest risk for health disparities to make more informed decisions about their health.
- Provide a two-day training for NJDHSS staff to increase skills in developing health literacy materials that more effectively target minority communities.
- Federal Region II will join the nation in launching a series of health disparities roundtable discussions in 2007 in order to develop a national blueprint for addressing health disparities. The roundtable discussions will provide an important opportunity for communities at the local level to develop agendas that build on current NJDHSS initiatives.

### *Outcome Measures*

- Based on availability of funding, OMMH will fund the Empowering Communities with Health Information Project.
- A minimum of 25 NJDHSS staff will be trained to develop easy to read documents that take into account the characteristics of the targeted audience.
- OMMH will conduct one community roundtable discussion and issue a report that outlines specific strategies for partnership with NJDHSS in addressing health disparities.