



## A Newsletter of the Office of Minority Health

### Environmental Injustice? October 1997

#### EPA's Office of Environmental Justice

All the things people don't want in their backyards are in the backyards of minority populations and those who are disadvantaged, said Clarice Gaylord, PhD, director of the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Office of Environmental Justice.

In response to public concern, EPA formed the Office of Environmental Equity (later changed to the Office of Environmental Justice) in 1992.

EPA defines environmental justice as fair treatment and equal protection under environmental laws to ensure that all people, regardless of race, culture, or income level, live in clean, safe, and sustainable communities.

The office initially focused on environmental justice outreach and education. This involved empowering residents of minority and low-income communities to understand their rights and responsibilities under environmental laws and to become involved in environmental decision-making.

"We wanted citizens to know that they can become members of siting boards and learn how to access information about the health impact of environmental changes in their communities," Dr. Gaylord said.

To ensure community participation in its plans, EPA established the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) in 1993. The council represents an opportunity for community, industry, and state and local governments to come together and tackle environmental justice problems.

In addition to having members from key environmental justice

#### Some of the Major Events: Environmental Justice Movement

**1971:** Council of Environmental Quality annual report acknowledges racial discrimination adversely affects environment of urban poor people.

**1979:** Robert Bullard, now at the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, studies an affluent African American community's attempt to block the siting of a landfill in Houston.

**1982:** Citizens in Warren County, North Carolina protest PCB landfill.

**1983:** General Accounting Office report states that 3 out of 4

constituencies, NEJAC has subcommittees to help develop strategic plans for the agency.

The original subcommittees covered public participation and accountability; health and research; enforcement; and waste and facility siting. Two more subcommittees were added: indigenous peoples and international affairs.

NEJAC's accomplishments include conducting public dialogue meetings in major cities. A significant event for the Office of Environmental Justice, Dr. Gaylord said, was that in 1993 EPA Administrator Carol Browner made environmental justice an agency priority.

"Our office became a national program office, and we expanded our focus to address many issues, in addition to outreach and education," Dr. Gaylord said. For example, the office was able to investigate environmental justice data collection and analysis, as well as the health effects of environmental hazards.

Another boost to environmental justice came in 1994 when President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898 to establish environmental justice as a national priority. The Executive Order, titled "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations," marked the first Presidential effort to direct all federal agencies with a public health or environmental mission to incorporate environmental justice strategies in their activities.

"Changes in environmental justice are slow in coming," but there have been some successes, Dr. Gaylord said. As a result of a relocation roundtable held with community members at the end of 1996, EPA is in the process of moving 358 members of an African American community away from a hazardous waste site, Dr. Gaylord said. "EPA has relocated eight communities in the past, but this is the first time the agency will have ever relocated an African American community. We are looking closely at our national relocation policy."

The main goals for the Office of Environmental Justice now, Dr. Gaylord said, are to continue increasing public involvement in the office's strategies.

*For more information, call the Office of Environmental Justice at 202-564-2515.*

***--Michelle Meadows***

hazardous waste facilities in EPA's Region 4 are in African American communities.

**1987:** United Church of Christ (UCC) Commission for Racial Justice issues report called Toxic Waste and Race in the United States, which states that though socioeconomic factors play a role in the siting of toxic waste facilities, race is the major factor.

**1990:** Conference at the University of Michigan releases report called Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards.

Bullard publishes *Dumping in Dixie*, recognized as the first textbook on environmental justice.

**1991:** First National People of Color Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C. adopts the Principles of Environmental Justice.

**1992:** EPA releases *Environmental Equity: Reducing Risk for All Communities*, and establishes Office of Environmental Justice.

**1993:** EPA establishes the National Environmental Justice Advisory Council, and Browner makes environmental justice an EPA priority.

**1994:** Federal agencies, including the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, NIH, hold symposium on environmental justice.

President Clinton issues Executive Order 12898, and Interagency Working Group on Environmental Justice is established.

UCC issues Toxic Waste and Race Revisited, strengthening the link between race and waste facilities.

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# Closing the GAP

Office of Minority Health Public Health Service U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

## Environmental Injustice?

### *Landfill Prompts Concern in North Carolina*

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For Massenberg Kearney, the worst part about living less than half a mile from a toxic waste landfill is the uncertainty. He knows that it can take years for the harmful effects of toxic waste exposure to show up. And as far as he knows, it's not clear how much, if at all, his health is at risk.

"There's nothing I can really put my hands on," he said. "When I have health problems or when a lot of my animals die, I do wonder if it has anything to do with the landfill."

Fifteen years have passed since the state of North Carolina constructed the landfill in Warren County. Not everyone there is concerned about it. But then there are those like Mr. Kearney who have questions: Is the landfill leaking? Is the health of my family in danger? What is the state doing to clean up the site? And why did the state choose my community to contain hazardous waste?

The answers vary depending on who you ask, and therein lies a significant source of the frustration and confusion among some Warren County residents.

"Sometimes it seems like we're in the same place we were in 1982," said Kearney, referring to when he marched in protests of the landfill.

The controversy began in 1978 when oil contaminated with

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toxic chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) was illegally dumped along more than 200 miles of road shoulders in 14 counties in North Carolina. State officials chose a site near the town of Afton to contain the more than 6,000 truckloads of toxic soil. Afton has a population of approximately 1600 and is 85 percent African American. The town is located at the southern end of Warren County, also mostly African American, and one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. Some believe these characteristics led Warren County to become the final choice as the disposal site.

“When community members don’t have a lot of political and economic resources, it makes it harder to fight back,” said Ken Ferruccio, a community activist who lives near the landfill and had a major role in the protests. “The state was trying to follow the path of the least resistance.”

But from the state’s perspective, the site near Afton was chosen because it was the most environmentally suitable. “We looked at 93 sites in 13 counties, and considered several factors in making a decision, such as the soil characteristics of the area and the population density--the site that would affect the least amount of people,” said Bill Meyer, director of the Division of Waste Management for North Carolina’s Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources.

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*Blake Crawford, Executive Editor  
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Fifteen years have passed since the state of North Carolina constructed the landfill in Warren County. Not everyone there is concerned about it. But then there are those like Mr. Kearney who have questions: Is the landfill leaking? Is the health of my family in danger? What is the state doing to clean up the site? And why did the state choose my community to contain hazardous waste?

The answers vary depending on who you ask, and therein lies a significant source of the frustration and confusion among some Warren County residents.

"Sometimes it seems like we're in the same place we were in 1982," said Kearney, referring to when he marched in protests of the landfill.

The controversy began in 1978 when oil contaminated with toxic chemicals called polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) was illegally dumped along more than 200 miles of road shoulders in 14 counties in North Carolina. State officials chose a site near the town of Afton to contain the more than 6,000 truckloads of toxic soil. Afton has a population of approximately 1600 and is 85 percent African American. The town is located at the southern end of Warren County, also mostly African American, and one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. Some believe these characteristics led Warren County to become the final choice as the disposal site.

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near the landfill and had a major role in the protests. “The state was trying to follow the path of the least resistance.”

But from the state’s perspective, the site near Afton was chosen because it was the most environmentally suitable. “We looked at 93 sites in 13 counties, and considered several factors in making a decision, such as the soil characteristics of the area and the population density--the site that would affect the least amount of people,” said Bill Meyer, director of the Division of Waste Management for North Carolina’s Department of Environment, Health, and Natural Resources.

Public concern about the landfill turned into organized protest in September of 1982, and the environmental justice movement advanced to a national level. Led by leading civil rights groups, all kinds of people--Whites, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans--participated in six weeks of protests that involved marching and blocking the roads to the landfill. The protests resulted in more than 550 arrests, attracting the attention of the national media and Congress.

At the request of Walter Fauntroy, former District of Columbia delegate and then chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, the U.S. General Accounting Office conducted an investigation in 1983 that confirmed a suspected pattern. Three out of four disposal sites in the Southeastern United States were located in mostly poor, African American communities.

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Despite the protests in Warren County, the landfill was completed, which came as no surprise to residents. “We knew the trucks would be rolling in,” said Deborah Ferruccio, Ken’s wife. “We blocked those roads to make a point, and to make the state think twice about putting other dumps here.” It marked the first time people were arrested over the siting of a landfill.

“It’s a gross injustice any time a toxic waste facility is put in a community that is already destitute,” according to Dollie Burwell. She has lived four miles from the landfill since 1972 and also had a major role in the protests.

“Not only do we wonder about our health,” she said, “but the landfill has had a negative impact on the value of our land.” Many people have worked hard to cultivate land, only to find that the landfill has devalued their property. That kind of blow can be devastating.

Often overlooked is the psychological impact of living near a toxic waste landfill. Ms. Burwell’s daughter, Kim, who was 10 years old at the time of the protests, wouldn’t go out for recess at school because she was frightened; she had heard a rumor that breathing the air could kill her instantaneously.

The drinking water was also an issue. Many children at South Warren Elementary School didn't want to drink the water for fear of the PCBs. "Even now, when Kim comes here to visit, she won't drink the water," Ms. Burwell said.

Both Mr. Kearney and the Ferruccios have recently spent at least \$5,000 on water filters because they wonder about the safety of their drinking water. "I don't know for sure that the filtering helps, but it makes me feel better," Mr. Kearney said. "I do it because those PCBs are poisonous."

And while worrying about the water is understandable, there is no direct evidence that the drinking water in the area around the landfill is contaminated with PCBs, according to Joel Hirschhorn, independent science advisor to the Joint Warren County/State PCB Landfill Working Group, of which Ms. Burwell serves as co-chair.

"Of more concern is contamination in the air and soil," said Dr. Hirschhorn, who believes the landfill is leaking. "We have hard evidence that there are cracks in the top liner of the landfill, which is why it's not surprising that we've found PCB air emissions."

The PCB Landfill Working Group, made up of local citizens and local and state officials, recently contacted Region 4 of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), charging that the landfill does not comply with federal regulations. (*cont. below*)

## POLYCHLORINATED BIPHENYLS (PCBs)

PCBs rank sixth on the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)/Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) list of top 20 hazardous substances. In the past, PCBs were widely used as coolants, insulating materials, and lubricants in electrical equipment such as transformers. The United States stopped making the toxic chemicals in 1977 because of health effects associated with exposure. Routes of exposure to PCBs include drinking water, contaminated food such as fish, and skin contact to soil and air. It is widely accepted that PCBs resistance to decomposition in soil and water threatens wildlife. According to ATSDR, repeated skin contact to PCBs in rabbits caused liver, kidney, and skin damage; a single large exposure to skin caused death in rabbits. PCBs' effects on humans, however, are not clear. PCBs are among those substances that are probable carcinogens based on animal experiments, according to the American Cancer Society. We cannot definitively say that PCBs cause cancer, said Bailus Walker, professor of environmental medicine and

associate director of Howard University's Cancer Center in Washington, D.C. "Some PCBs may be a risk factor for cancer."

Alleged violations pertain to groundwater monitoring and leachate management.

According to EPA, there is 10 to 15 feet of standing water in the landfill, which is unacceptable because of the potential for that water to be released into the environment. "The county is in a vulnerable position," Ms. Burwell said, "because the liner could break away at any moment." This could be a dangerous occurrence if the water is contaminated.

EPA is requiring that the state upgrade the landfill's leachate removal system. The agency is also conducting its own investigation on whether the landfill is leaking. According to Craig Brown, an environmental engineer with EPA, "Monitoring data so far is insufficient to determine if the landfill is releasing toxic substances to the environment."

Both EPA and the state of North Carolina maintained that the landfill is "relatively safe." But Dr. Hirschhorn has another opinion. He called the landfill "an unsafe situation." How unsafe, he added, is a tough question. "In addition to PCBs, we have found Dioxins in a couple of monitoring wells near the landfill." Dioxins are chemicals viewed as even more toxic than PCBs.

In Dr. Hirschhorn's view, there are a couple of choices in this scenario. The state can use technology to detoxify the landfill completely and make it safe, which is what the Working Group is pushing for. There are technologies today that did not exist before. Or the state can take a cheaper route, making some repairs such as putting in a new top liner or pumping the water out.

Bill Meyer said his team at North Carolina's division of waste management is committed to doing both: "We plan to make the repairs and we are also working on selecting a feasible technology to detoxify the landfill," he said. "We are getting cost estimates, and expect it will cost between 20 to 30 million dollars to detoxify the landfill. Then we'll go to the General Assembly to request the funds." Whether the state legislature will appropriate funds is hard to tell.

"Detoxifying is an expensive proposition," Dr. Hirschhorn said. "But it's worth it to the people who live there."

Ms. Bobbi Riley doesn't plan to wait and see what the state's next move will be. She has lived two miles from the landfill for eight years, and her family has decided to risk the financial loss and move to another county. "I worry about all the times I told my kids to go outside and get some fresh air," she said. "The chance that my family's health is in danger is a chance I'm not willing to take."

Moving is the right choice for Riley's family, but not everyone near the landfill can afford to make or even wants to make that choice. Mr. Kearney, for example, has

family ties to Warren County.

“I was born here and own 35 acres of land in this area,” he said. “I can’t just pick up and leave. This is my home.”

*The PCB Landfill Working Group can be reached at 919-257-1948.*

*--by Michelle Meadows*

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## Minority Health Perspective

### *Environmental Equity: Colleges and Universities Can Help*

by Bailus Walker, Jr., PhD, MPH

Associate Director, Cancer Center at Howard University  
Medical Center, and professor of environmental  
and occupational medicine

Environmental policies have improved steadily and substantially in the United States since Americans celebrated their first Earth Day in 1970 to demonstrate their growing concerns about the environment. But geographic areas inhabited chiefly by racial and ethnic minority groups are still more likely than mostly White areas to experience serious air, water, and soil pollution from industries such as oil refineries and chemical plants. Low-income and minority communities also are more likely to house waste treatment facilities, incinerators, and toxic-waste dumps. And children in minority communities face a higher-than-average risk of lead poisoning because of lead-based paint in their homes.

The realization that people of color, as well as other low-income groups, are exposed to more environmental pollution than are Whites has added the concept of "environmental equity" to the modern environmental movement. Yet most colleges and universities, especially those in urban areas and near communities suffering the effects of pollutants, can do more to help combat environmental inequities. They can do more through intensified research and greater involvement in regional development that promotes environmental equity. Academic institutions can be particularly useful in finding new solutions to environmental inequities, because the most likely soldiers in this war--the federal government and many environmental groups--are viewed with suspicion by many Blacks and Hispanics.

Some critics believe the federal government enforces environmental laws less stringently in Black communities than in predominantly White neighborhoods. A National Law Journal report a few years ago supported this view. The report pulled together census data, dockets of court cases involving the Environmental Protection

Agency (EPA), and EPA's record of cleaning up hazardous waste sites. And many Black and Hispanic leaders have long felt that mainstream organizations appear more concerned with plant and animal habitats than with conditions in urban centers.

Some leaders of the environmental equity movement argue that "the environmental movement itself is responsible for much of the inequity," as pointed out in *Environmentalism at the Crossroads*, a book by Jonathan Adler, director of environmental studies at the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute.

These critics charge that environmentalists have devoted their energies to making life in the mostly White suburbs better by concentrating on issues such as reducing noise from airliners, protecting bird populations, preserving grasslands and forests in the suburbs, and improving public transportation to reduce pollution from cars. Where they have succeeded, the result has been to draw investments, jobs, and residents away from inner cities, making life there bleaker.

To be fair, environmentalists are now paying more attention to the problems of minority communities that are exposed to high concentrations of toxic pollutants, following two decades of complaints from residents in areas such as Louisiana's "Cancer Alley," an area between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that is home to a huge cluster of chemical plants and oil refineries. Residents there contend that cancer and many other diseases affect disproportionate numbers of low-income, minority residents in the area.

Although members of minority groups believe that environmental activists are paying more attention to their concerns now, they do not think that the environmentalists' usual response--to push federal agencies--is enough. Critics do not trust the government to give them accurate information about, or to protect them from, environmental dangers. In the face of this alienation, federal and state programs must leap a substantial credibility gap before they can begin to operate effectively.

Suspensions of federal and local government programs seem understandable in the face of many documented instances of such practices as the "targeting" of Black communities as sites for new hazardous waste facilities. In 1990, for example, Robert Bullard, professor of sociology and head of the Environmental Justice Resource Center at Clark Atlanta University, found that six of the eight waste-disposal incinerators in the city of Houston were located in Black neighborhoods.

And last September, Brent Staples, a member of the editorial board with *The New York Times*, reported on environmental conditions in Chester, Pa., a mainly Black city of approximately 30,000 located south of Philadelphia. He found that Chester contained five hazardous waste facilities, compared with two in the rest of Delaware County, which is overwhelmingly White. The Chester plants process more than two million tons of waste per year; the other two plants handle less than one percent of that amount. Facilities in Chester also treat most of the county's raw sewage.

Because of the concentration of such facilities, Chester accounts for 75 percent of the county's air pollution complaints.

Clearly, issues of environmental inequity are not solely ecological, environmental, or health-related. They are also social, economic, and political. We cannot address one facet of the problem at a time.

A key need in finding remedies is more medical research on the epidemiology of environmentally-provoked disease and dysfunction, such as learning difficulties related to lead poisoning among racial minorities. We also need to devote more money to programs that increase the number of minority students pursuing careers in environmental science, as well as to such efforts as the National Library of Medicine's program to strengthen environmental teaching and research at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs.)

Florida A & M University provides an example of what can be done. The university has worked with the National Library of Medicine to develop a multidisciplinary program in environmental health that emphasizes preventing pollution and enhancing equity. The program's goal is to make environmental awareness an integral part of the university's curricula in the physical and biological sciences. Meharry Medical College is another good example; experts there are studying environmental conditions in Black communities in the Mississippi delta, which has a high concentration of polluting facilities.

Since 1990, the Energy Department has assisted a consortium of HBCUs with expanding environmental courses, setting up outreach programs in communities, and developing technologies to manage and dispose of hazardous and radioactive wastes safely. Federal grants from EPA have also helped some universities in the consortium develop research centers to work with affected communities.

Experts at these institutions have learned that environmental inequity may result from haphazard land-use decisions and zoning that designates parcels of land for industry without providing adequate buffer zones for nearby working-class residences.

University researchers can help by posing questions for local debate and by helping negotiate resolutions to disputes over land use and the location of pollution-producing facilities. In urban centers, poor people have little political clout, so broad coalitions of concerned individuals and groups must be fashioned. Universities can supply faculty experts and convene local groups.

Scholars need to go beyond evaluation to communication--talking with neighborhood groups, issuing reports and press releases, condensing research findings into easy-to-understand fact sheets, and testifying before legislative bodies. And we can do a better job of teaching students about the close links between environmental justice and social and economic issues.

Those of us with expertise in the medical, social, and economic dimensions of environmental problems owe it to our fellow citizens to use that knowledge to halt

environmental inequities.

**--Adapted and reprinted from the Chronicle of Higher Education**

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#### *Misuse of Methyl Parathion*

**E**arlier this year, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a national alert to warn the public about the illegal use of methyl parathion, an agricultural insecticide approved only for outdoor use.

“There has been an emerging pattern of the illegal sale of the pesticide for indoor use,” said Pam Tucker, MD, chief of ATSDR’s Health Promotion Branch. “But when used at high doses in homes to kill roaches and other indoor insects, the insecticide can cause serious health problems for people and pets. Severe exposure can be fatal.”

In a recent case, unlicensed pest control operators illegally sprayed many houses and other buildings in Jackson County, Mississippi. Residents reported flu-like symptoms, headaches, and diarrhea that could be consistent with low-dose exposure. In response EPA took emergency action, relocating 1,416 residents from 365 homes. Eight day care centers, one restaurant and two hotels have been closed. Several people have been arrested and criminally charged with misuse and illegal sale of the pesticide.

According to ATSDR’s latest update of the methyl parathion contamination problem, similar incidents have occurred in at least eight other states: Alabama, Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas, Illinois, and Texas, Ohio, and Michigan. Most incidents have affected a cross section of people, and others have affected mostly African American communities. EPA and ATSDR have adopted a common procedure to respond to the emergencies.

The agencies advise that if you hire someone to treat your home for a pest problem, ask to see that person’s certification. It is also important to ask for the brand name of the pesticide and the name of the product’s active ingredient. Methyl Parathion has been marketed under the names: Nitrox; Penncap-M; Dithon 63; Ketokil 52; Seis-Tres 6-3; Metaspray 5E; and Paraspray 6-3. ATSDR’s Emergency Response Hotline number is **404-639-0615**.

--by *Michelle Meadows*

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#### *Nominations Sought for Carcinogen Report*

The National Toxicology Program, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, has invited the public to nominate substances or mixtures to be evaluated for listing in the National Toxicology Program's Biennial Report on Carcinogens. The report lists substances "known to be human carcinogens," and a much larger group "reasonably anticipated to be human carcinogens." There is no deadline. Nominations may be made by consumers, individual workers, businesses or others. Nominations should include copies or references to relevant data that have appeared in journals or other reports about the substance's carcinogenic potential, and about the extent of exposure. Send nominations to: The NTP, Biennial Report on Carcinogens, Mail Drop WC-05, PO Box 12233, Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27709.

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#### *Community Involvement in Hazardous Waste Issues*

**T**here are hazardous waste sites all over this country, and communities in the surrounding areas are often faced with incomplete information about health risks. Some community members feel that researchers come in to investigate the site, but then they don't share or explain their research findings.

The Boston University School of Public Health and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) recently released a new report called *Learning from Success: Health Agency Efforts to Improve Community Involvement in Communities Affected by Hazardous Waste Sites*.

The report offers recommendations to encourage positive interactions between communities and public health agencies. One example is the case of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, which uses the rivers near the General Motors Central Foundry Division in Massena, New York. PCBs were used and disposed of on the site from 1938 to 1973, causing contamination to the nearby water bodies such as the St. Lawrence River.

Toxic contamination from the site, which was placed on EPA's National Priorities List in 1983, has threatened the community's health, as well as its socioeconomic and cultural base. In response, the Akwesasne Task Force on the Environment (ATFE) formed as a community-based organization. When outside researchers came into the community, the task force established a research advisory committee to guide environmental research in the area.

The ATFE became incorporated so it could apply for research grants and have control over the use of data. The community took the initiative to partner with the New York Department of Health and the State University of New York to conduct studies. One study has revealed that mothers have been exposed to PCBs by eating local fish, and the contamination was passed to their infants through breast milk. Another study is exploring the effects of PCBs on the physical and cognitive abilities of adolescents.

Research agreements to ensure that studies are in sync with community needs have been key. In addition to helping involve the community in the research process, ATFE initiated cultural sensitivity training for researchers, and organized presentations that explain the research to the community.

The study concludes that “by recognizing and anticipating community needs and by actively soliciting community concerns and input, agencies could do a great deal to eliminate rancor, controversy, and adverse publicity, and deliver services that better meet the health-related needs of communities at a lower cost.”

This report includes studies of activities on 11 hazardous waste sites. *To request a copy, call ATSDR’s Division of Health Education and Promotion, 404-639-6204; Fax 404-639-6207.*

*--by Michelle Meadows*

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#### *NIAID Supports National Inner-City Asthma Study*

The first phase of the National Cooperative Inner-City Asthma Study (NCICAS) recently made headlines with a surprising discovery.

The combination of cockroach allergy and exposure to the insects is an important cause of asthma-related illness and hospitalization among children living in U.S. inner-city areas. Asthma is a chronic, inflammatory lung disease characterized by recurrent breathing problems.

The study, which focused on African American and Hispanic children, was funded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), National Institutes of Health. The study is part of an effort to combat the dangerous rise in asthma-related illnesses and mortality rates among inner-city children.

The results of Phase I of the NCICAS were reported in the May 8, 1997, issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

The study included 1,528 children from several cities, including New York, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, and Chicago. All of the children came from households that were below the 1990 poverty level and had been diagnosed with asthma by a physician.

The children were given skin tests for hypersensitivity for several allergens including dust mites, cat dander, and cockroaches. Measurements of these allergens were also taken from household dusts in the children's bedrooms.

**The National Asthma Education and Prevention Program (NAEPP)**, part of the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, works to increase public awareness of asthma as a public health problem; to improve patient knowledge of asthma detection and treatment, especially in high-risk populations; and to define guidelines for asthma education programs.

NAEPP sponsored the first national conference on asthma management in 1992, and NAEPP produced a report in 1995 on asthma management in minority children.

An NAEPP coordinating committee of several health organizations and agencies provides input on program strategies and shares information on asthma-related activities. For example, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Environmental Health (NCEH) is carrying out a project called "Identification and Prevention of Exposure to Air Pollutants and Other Environmental Detriments of Asthma Among Minority Children in Urban Areas." *See page 10 for more on NCEH.*

Results showed that 36.8 percent of the children were allergic to cockroach allergen, compared to the 34.9 and 22.7 percent respectively, from dust mites and cat dander.

The bedroom tests showed that 50.2 percent of the rooms had high levels of cockroach allergen, compared to 9.7 percent and 12.6 percent for dust mites and cat dander.

Children who were both allergic to cockroaches and exposed to high cockroach allergen levels missed school more often than others, and needed twice as many unscheduled asthma-related medical visits.

Phase II of the NCICAS studied the effectiveness of a program to develop knowledge about asthma, promote self-management skills, and manage exposure to environmental factors associated with asthma.

NIAID supports research and developments in understanding how asthma impacts all populations, but recent emphasis has been placed on minority populations because of asthma's disproportionate impact on minorities. For example, African American children are three to four times more likely than White children to be hospitalized for asthma, and four to six times more likely to die from asthma.

More information about NIAID's work on asthma can be found at its web site: <http://www.naiad.nih.gov>

The NCICAS has produced *A Guide for Helping Children With Asthma*. To request a copy, call NIAID at 301-496-5717.

*--by Marisa Urgo*

*The National Asthma Education and Prevention Program provides materials on asthma for patients and professionals. Call 301-251-1222.*

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## A Newsletter of the Office of Minority Health

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#### *Giving a Voice to AAPI Communities*

**W**hen the Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) opened its doors in Oakland, California in 1993, it set out to give Asian American and Pacific Islander American (AAPI) communities a voice in the area of environmental issues. According to Peggy Saika, executive director of APEN, the organization's approach balances economic development, social justice, and environmental protection--issues that have historically been seen as separate.

"Mainstream environmental activists have developed agendas that focus on wilderness and wildlife preservation, resource management, pollution abatement, and population control," said Ms. Saika. "But many activists of color have also been engaged in empowerment struggles regarding employment, housing, education, and health care."

To assess community needs and determine priority areas, APEN conducted an evaluation of the Asian and Pacific Islander population in the six Bay area counties. This involved accumulating demographic data, meeting with community leaders, and exploring opportunities for collaboration.

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**"Where we work, where we live, where our kids go to school, and where we play all define our environmental issues."**

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The results of the needs assessment revealed several points that have guided APEN in its work. For example, there was a need to conduct bilingual and culturally accessible education about environmental hazards. In one instance, health officials in California issued an advisory against eating Bay fish more than twice a month because the fish are so contaminated with PCBs, mercury, dioxin, and pesticides. Laotians in that area, however, generally eat more than two Bay fish per month.

According to APEN, it is not enough to tell people to stop feeding fish to their families. "An environmental justice agenda demands a more long-term approach," Ms. Saika said. APEN contracted with a Laotian woman to help organize community meetings that would discuss effective ways to help the Laotian community learn about the fishing regulations and advisories, as well as the reasoning behind them.

In addition to the fish education project, APEN has initiated other campaigns such as one that educates the public about lead in Asian dishware, and one that empowers community members who live near toxic waste sites to learn about the management of the sites. The network is also conducting a long-term study on the effect of dioxins in seafood.

APEN's projects reflect the organization's understanding that environmental justice covers a spectrum of issues, Ms. Saika said. "Where we work, where we live, where our kids go to school, and where we play all define our environmental issues." *For more information about the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, call 510-834-8920.*

*--by Michelle Meadows*

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#### *CDC Proposes New Lead Screening Guidelines*

Lead blood levels for Americans have declined dramatically, but some children continue to be at risk of lead exposure, according to recent reports from the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC).

Lead exposure in young children is of particular concern because children absorb lead more readily than adults, and a child's developing nervous system is particularly vulnerable to lead's effects.

Recent declines in blood lead levels are believed to be the result of removal of lead from gasoline, as well as from other sources such as household paint, food and drink cans, and plumbing systems.

But blood lead levels remain high among children in low-income families, especially those living in older housing where lead paint may have been used. More than one-fifth of non-Hispanic African American children living in older homes have elevated blood lead levels.

To reach children at risk, CDC is proposing an updated lead screening guidance to be used by state and local health officials. The guidelines recommend that health officials determine appropriate screening policies by targeting their efforts at children who live in older homes and children from low-income families. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development estimates that approximately 4 million homes where young children live contain lead-based paint hazards.

"The new guidance does not change CDC's position on the adverse health effects caused by lead," said CDC director Dr. David Satcher. "Instead, we want to increase screening and follow-up care for those children who are at risk. The best way to do this is through state and local public health officials."

*The draft of the new guidance is available by calling 1-888-232-6789.*

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**The National Lead Information Center has new bilingual Web pages on its site. There is an English and Spanish document order form and new links to Spanish-language web sites with information on lead-related issues. The address is**

**<http://www.nsc.org/ehc/leadspan.htm> The National Lead Information Center is part of the Environmental Health Safety Center, a division of the National Safety Council. The center publishes a free newsletter called *Lead Inform*. Funding for the center is provided by CDC, EPA, and HUD. Call **1-800-424-LEAD****

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## A Newsletter of the Office of Minority Health

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## Migrant Farmworkers Suffer from Pesticide Exposure

**M**igrant farmworkers are one of the most underserved and understudied occupational populations in the United States, despite the fact that they work in one of the most hazardous occupations.

The World Resources Institute has estimated that as many as 313,000 farm workers in the U.S. may suffer from pesticide-related illnesses each year. About 800 to 1,000 farm workers die each year as a direct consequence of pesticide exposure.

Eighty-five percent of the migrant and seasonal farmworkers in the U.S. are minorities. The majority are Mexicans, followed by Puerto Ricans, Caribbean Blacks, and African Americans.

Pesticides are defined as any poison used to destroy pests. Examples of pesticides include insecticides, fungicides, rodenticides, and herbicides.

Agricultural workers can absorb pesticides through their skin, through inhalation, and by ingestion. Spraying with pesticides while workers are in the field is not uncommon.

The exposure can result in serious health problems, including acute systematic poisoning--abdominal pain, nausea, dizziness, vomiting, headaches, and skin or eye problems. Chronic health problems may include chronic dermatitis, fatigue, sleep disturbances, anxiety, memory problems, different

### **Services of the National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH)**

#### **Migrant Health Resource Center:**

The center collects and distributes materials to serve the information needs of migrant health centers. Services include a job bank and a resume bank.  
*512-328-7682*

#### **Call for Health Project:**

This project operates a toll-free telephone line to provide migrant farmworkers with health information and referral services. *1-800-377-9968*

#### **Farmworker News:**

This newsletter provides farmworkers information on how to protect their health.

#### **Technical assistance:**

The center offers migrant-specific assistance and consultation to organizations on policy and administrative issues, funding resources, grant writing, and specific farmworker initiatives.

#### **Migrant Clinicians Network:**

NCFH collaborates with this network of clinical professionals who provide

kinds of cancers, and birth defects.

The National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) is one organization that works to break down the barriers to safe and healthy living for farmworkers.

Core funding for NCFH comes from the Health Resources and Services Administration, Bureau of Primary Health Care, Migrant Health Branch. The center also receives funding from other agencies including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety.

According to NCFH, poverty, frequent mobility, low literacy, and language and cultural barriers can impede farmworkers' access to social services and other cost-effective primary care. Economic pressures make farm workers reluctant to miss work, and they are not protected by sick leave. These circumstances cause them to postpone seeking health care, and rely on expensive emergency room care.

With a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), NCHF runs a "train the trainer" program. Prospective trainers have included union members, migrant education specialists, and community liaisons--those who have a direct link to the farmworkers.

The program instructs participants on the possible risks associated with exposure to pesticides, and provides guidance on delivering effective presentations, using audiovisual aids, developing lesson plans, and creating effective learning environments.

"In order to meet the needs of the people being trained, we conduct the trainings in the areas where migrant farmworkers reside," said Linda Lopez, RN, a former health education consultant for NCFH who runs the training program. Ten trainings have taken place in various parts of the country.

"There are 11 critical points that all training

health and human services to  
farmworkers. 512-328-7682

programs need to include as mandated by EPA,” Lopez said. “But each state may have specific regulations regarding the certification process and follow-up activities.”

Though there is no formal mechanism for measuring the long-term benefits of the program, the best indicator of the number of workers trained is the growing number of educational booklets that have been supplied to trainers. The booklets, provided by EPA, are available in English and Spanish.

“We have conducted some of our training programs in Spanish so that language is not a barrier to the success of the program,” Ms. Lopez said.

Based in Austin, Texas, NCFH has worked to improve the health of farmworkers and their families since 1975.

*For more information, call 512-328-7682;*

*Web: <http://www.ncfh.org>*

*--Jean Oxendine*

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# CLOSING THE GAP

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#### *Expansion of Brownfields Initiative*



In May 13, 1997, Vice President Gore announced that he was bringing together resources of more than 15 federal agencies as part of the Clinton Administration's new ["Brownfields National Partnership."](#) The partnership builds on the Administration's actions to empower and revitalize America's communities.

This expanded effort includes commitments from across the federal government and the private sector to help thousands of communities clean up and redevelop Brownfields--abandoned pieces of land, usually in inner cities, that are contaminated from previous industrial use.

An example of a successfully redeveloped Brownfields site is Eugenio Maria de Hostos Community College in South Bronx, New York. The college used to be an abandoned tire factory.

In addition to announcing the national partnership, the Vice President and senior Administration officials announced a new round of Brownfields project grants and a call to Congress to pass the President's Brownfields legislative package.

The Brownfields Partnership, which includes a \$300 million Federal investment in Brownfields cleanup, is expected to leverage from \$5 billion to \$28 billion in private investment, support up to 196,000 jobs, and protect up to 34,000 acres of undeveloped "greenfield" areas.

The Administration launched the Brownfields initiative in November 1993 with a \$200,000 grant from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to Cleveland, Ohio, so that state and local officials could help create a model for redeveloping these areas across the country.

In 1995, EPA cosponsored a series of public hearings on Urban Revitalization and Brownfields. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was one of several federal agencies participating in these hearings. Residents of impacted

communities were able to help shape the initiative.

For the new Brownfields partnership, HHS is committing \$500,000, and leading an Administration-wide effort to develop a public health policy for Brownfields that will protect community residents.

“Brownfields ‘97”, a national conference, took place on September 3-5 in Kansas City, Missouri. The forum brought together key experts from all levels of government, business, finance, and local communities.

*For more information on the Brownfields National Partnership Agenda, call 1-800-424-9346. Web: [www.epa.gov/brownfields](http://www.epa.gov/brownfields)*

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#### *Update on IHS Sanitation Facilities Initiative*

Safe and adequate water supply and waste disposal systems are essential to the health of American Indian and Alaska Native communities.

The Sanitation Facilities Initiative of the Indian Health Service (IHS) focuses on expanding services to existing Indian homes, and then to new and renovated homes.

According to the annual sanitation facilities estimate for fiscal year 1997, approximately 47,492 American Indian/Alaska Native homes lack a safe water supply or adequate sewage disposal system or both, said Richard Barror, PhD, chief of the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction Program.

“IHS has identified a backlog of 2,400 needed sanitation facilities construction projects costing \$1.53 billion to provide all American Indians and Alaska Natives with safe drinking water and adequate sewage disposal,” he said.

The President’s FY97 budget proposal includes an additional \$29 million to help reduce the backlog of sanitation deficiencies. IHS is seeking supplemental funds from non-IHS sources.

According to IHS, families with satisfactory environmental conditions in their homes require 75 percent fewer medical services. Tribal governments have worked in partnership with the IHS Sanitation Facilities Construction Program since the passage of the Indian Sanitation Facilities Act in 1959.

Congress reaffirmed its support through the Indian Health Care Amendments of 1988. In accordance with the requirements of the amendments, IHS developed a 10-year funding plan for this initiative.

*For more information, contact Dr. Barror at 301-443-1046.*

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#### *Mercury Poisoning Project Addresses Magico-Religious Uses*

Dr. Arnold Wendroff of the Mercury Poisoning Project in Brooklyn, New York, has been working to alert health authorities about traditional practices involving mercury.

“Mercury is widely used by several Hispanic and Caribbean ethnic groups for magico-religious purposes,” Dr. Wendroff said. People obtain the mercury from shops called botanicas, which sell mercury illegally.

Traditional uses of mercury include placing it in candles or sprinkling it on floors. According to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, mercury is a naturally occurring element that appears as a silvery liquid. It volatilizes easily into the air as odorless, colorless vapors that are highly toxic and can be deadly.

Behaviors and attitudes regarding environmental risks vary among ethnic groups, Dr. Wendroff said, and it’s not clear whether people are unaware of mercury’s toxic nature or whether they ignore the health risks because of cultural norms.

*For more information about the Mercury Poisoning Project, call Dr. Wendroff at 718-499-8336.*

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## *CDC's National Center for Environmental Health*

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carries out applied research, disseminates guidelines and recommendations on environmental health, and assists state and local health agencies on environmental issues. The center has divisions on birth defects and disabilities; environmental hazards and health effects; and environmental health laboratory sciences; as well as programs on refugee health and emergency response coordinations. NCEH is especially interested in children and people who are often overlooked in public health. *Contact: NCEH at 770-488-7030. Web: <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh>*

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#### *Funding Opportunities*

EPA sponsors the **Environmental Justice Small Grants Program** to provide financial assistance to community groups that would like to carry out environmental justice projects. Community-based organizations, churches, and federally-recognized tribal governments are eligible to apply. To be placed on the national mailing list to receive information on the FY1998 Environmental Justice Small Grants, send your name, organization, address, and phone number to: EPA, Office of Environmental Justice Small Grants Program (2201A)  
FY 1998 Grants Mailing List  
401 M St., S.W.  
Washington, DC 20460.

**The Environmental Support Center**, a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C., is accepting applications from local, state, or regional organizations looking for training and technical assistance funds for environmental projects. Organizations serving low-income or minority constituencies are encouraged to apply. The deadline is open. Call 202-966-9834 for more information. Or visit the web site: <http://www.envsc.org>

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#### *Electric and Magnetic Fields Clearinghouse*

**T**he Environmental Health Clearinghouse of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences is now called the *Electric and Magnetic Fields Clearinghouse*. The center focuses on providing information about the health effects of residential exposure to electric and magnetic fields, such as power lines and appliances. A Spanish-language version of the document Questions and Answers on EMF is available. *Call the clearinghouse at 1-800-643-4794.*

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#### *NIEHS Trains Young Adults*

**T**he National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), National Institutes of Health, operates the Superfund Worker Education and Training Program. This program provides funds to non-profit organizations that develop and deliver training to workers who are involved in handling hazardous waste or in responding to emergencies relating to hazardous materials.

The Laborers' ACG Education and Training Fund (Laborers-ACG) is one project that focuses on American Indian/Alaska Native populations. The project has provided training on hazardous waste and asbestos abatement to members of more than 15 different tribes, including the Navajo, Sioux, Omaha, and Winnebago Nations.

NIEHS provides this training program under the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986. A 1991 reauthorization of the Superfund Program extended the NIEHS training program for an additional three-year period, and allotted \$20 million per year for the program.

This support helped expand the scope of the NIEHS program to include workers involved in the cleaning up nuclear weapons facilities. The program now has additional funding from the U.S. Department of Energy for this purpose.

More than 24,000 courses have been delivered through the program, and more than 500,000 workers have received training. In 1995 the NIEHS Training Program received funding from Congress for a pilot project called the Minority Worker Training Program (MWTP). This program recruits and trains young adults living near hazardous waste sites or in other contaminated areas for careers in the environmental restoration industry. For Fiscal Year 1998, the program's funding level is \$3 million.

"The rationale for MWTP is that in urban areas, benefits of clean up programs have not been reaching the community," according to Sharon Beard, an industrial hygienist with the program. "It is important for residents to become involved in cleaning up their communities."

More than 360 students aged 18 to 25 have been trained through MWTP, Ms. Beard said. And more than 200 have been placed in jobs. Salaries range from \$9 to \$25 per hour. The one-year training cycles cover life skills, interview techniques, as well as skills in math, science, and health and safety related to construction work.

“One of our main goals,” Ms. Beard said, “is to enhance participants’ problem-solving skills, their self esteem, and their ability to work together in applying technical knowledge to environmental problems.”

*For more information about these training programs, call NIEHS at 919-541-1863.*

Web: <http://www.niehs.nih.gov/wetp/home.htm>

*--Jean Oxendine*

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#### *Environmental Justice Resource Center*

**T**he Environmental Justice Resource Center (EJRC) at Clark Atlanta University addresses many environmental issues of concern to minority populations. Programs include the development of information systems to access environmental databases, and the development of community-based research workshops. The center's activities include building partnerships with government agencies, corporations, and community-based organizations. EJRC distributes several publications, including *The People of Color Environmental Groups Directory, 1994-1995*; and *Environmental Justice and Transportation: Building Model Partnerships Conference Proceedings, 1996*. For more information on EJRC, call 404-880-6911. Or, write to

Environmental Justice Resource Center  
Clark Atlanta University  
Box 141  
223 James P. Brawley Drive, SW  
Atlanta, GA 30314  
Web: <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu>

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#### *Indoor Air Quality Information Clearinghouse*

This clearinghouse provides information on the health effects of pollutants, standards and guidelines related to indoor air quality, and information on federal and state legislation.

Call 1-800-438-4318

Or, write to

IAQ Info  
P.O. Box 37133  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7133  
Fax: 202-484-1510  
E-mail: [iaqinfo@aol.com](mailto:iaqinfo@aol.com)

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#### *Research Training in Environmental Sciences*

**T**he National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), Duke University Medical Center, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have established a joint, two-year fellowship program for training nurses and physicians in environmental medicine and health research. The training program defines environmental medicine as the study of diseases and other conditions due to exposure to physical and chemical agents in the environment, and factors that might alter susceptibility to such agents. The program encourages nurses and physicians to work closely with NIEHS scientists. Applications to this fellowship program are accepted throughout the year. To find out about current openings and to obtain a Training Program Application, contact *Marcy Hirsch at Duke University: 919-684-6720. Or, contact Kelly Collier at UNC: 919-966-1435.* More details about the program are also available on the Web:

<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/external/emptrain.htm>

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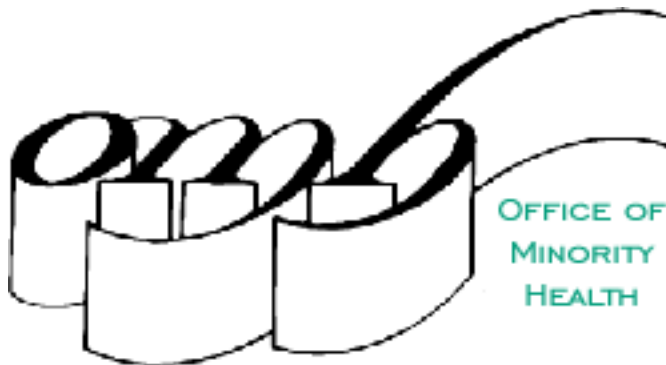
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#### *Conferences*



**November:**

**1-5:** Annual meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics, New Orleans, Louisiana. Contact: 847-228-5005, ext. 6338.

**7-12:** Annual meeting of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology, San Diego, California. Contact: 847-427-1200.

**9-13:** Annual conference of the American Public Health Association, Indianapolis, Indiana. Contact: 202-789-5670.

**16-20:** National Congress of American Indians, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Contact: 202-466-7767.

**December:**

**4-5:** Annual Conference of the National Perinatal Association.  
Contact: 813-971-1008.

**7-9:** "Managed Care Leadership Summit on International Health Care," Boca Raton, Florida.  
Contact: American Association of Health Plans, 202-778-3269.

**Conference on Poverty and Children's Health**

The Office of Minority Health is one of several sponsors of the U.S.-Mexico border binational conference on children's health, October 22-23, 1997, El Paso, Texas. The University of Texas System and the Texas-Mexico Border Health Coordination Office are organizing the conference, entitled "Salud Sin Fronteras...Health Without Boundaries, The Effects of Poverty on Children's Health." The conference will address several topics, including environmental health issues such as neural-tube defects along the U.S.-Mexico border, and the effects of second-hand smoke on children. *For more information, call 210-381-3687.*

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