

NAHN Comments to the 2nd Integrated Urban Air Toxics Report to Congress

The National Association of Hispanic Nurses (NAHN) would like to commend the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for its release on August 21, 2014 of the 2nd Integrated Urban Air Toxics Report to Congress. This is the final of two reports that is required under the Clean Air Act to inform Congress of EPA's actions and progress in reducing public health risks from urban toxics. NAHN commends the results of EPA's air toxics regulations which include a 66% reduction in benzene; approximately 60% reduction in mercury from man-made sources like coal-fired power plants; an 84% decrease of lead in outdoor air; and the removal of over a million tons per year of hazardous air pollutants (HAPs). However, additional work remains to be done to reduce remaining risks, particularly in overburdened and vulnerable communities.

Many Hispanic communities are on the frontlines of environmental pollution from numerous sources and thus suffer disproportionately the health consequences of these exposures. A CDC report highlights that Hispanics, along with Asian-Americans, are more likely to live in areas where air pollution fails to meet national standards.¹ NAHN is concerned about the environmental health of Hispanics because of the following:

- In the last decade, Hispanics account for more than 50% of population growth in the U.S. According to the Census Bureau, Hispanics are more likely to work in outdoor jobs with higher exposure to air pollutants and the CDC estimates that 48.4% of all Hispanics live in counties that frequently violate group-level ozone standards.² Evidence shows that breathing ozone inflames deep lung tissue, making it more difficult to breathe deeply, often causing shortness of breath. Worse, repeated inflammation over time may permanently scar lung tissue. A report in 2008 indicated that 4.7 million Hispanics had been diagnosed with asthma in their lifetime and Hispanics are 3 times more likely to die from asthma than other racial or ethnic groups.
- A CDC study reports that, on average, Hispanic children have higher levels of mercury in their bodies compared to non-Hispanic white children.³ A recent Sierra Club poll reported that 31% of Hispanics report fishing in freshwater lakes, where mercury pollution levels are significantly higher than in the ocean. Of those, 76% of Hispanics eat the fish and share what they catch with their families including children and women of childbearing age, the two populations most vulnerable to mercury poisoning.⁴
- Many primarily Hispanic communities are located in industrial areas where particle pollutants are constantly poured into the air by factories or located near major highways on which polluting diesel trucks travel.⁵ Evidence has linked exposure to particle pollution to cardiovascular disease, birth defects, low birth weights, premature births, and increased rates of death.⁶⁻¹⁴
- Hispanic children in general are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white children to exceed the CDC threshold for lead. In adults, lead has been linked to neurological problems, high blood pressure, and kidney problems. In children, lead is known to cause neurological problems even at tiny doses. Most notably, lead has been correlated with a decline in IQ, with learning disabilities, and with hyperactive behavior, violence, and an increase in antisocial behavior in children.¹⁵

Hispanic nurses have a unique understanding of how important environmental health is as many have lived or have family that live in high ozone polluted communities. Nurses are also at the frontlines providing health care for individuals who suffer with chronic diseases, such as asthma and cardiovascular disease due to long-term exposure to air pollution and other environmental factors. As the report indicates, the EPA has taken great strides in addressing environmental justice and the inequities in

pollution-related health problems affecting Hispanic communities. However much remains to be done and NAHN stands ready to assist the EPA in engaging and educating Hispanic communities relative to the risks posed by air pollution and how to minimize their risks, to ultimately lead long and healthy lives.

References:

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