

Bronx Health REACH 2010

Fall 2010

A Letter from Our Project Director

**MAKING
HEALTH
EQUALITY
REALITY**

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Making Health Equality a Reality

Bronx Health REACH/ NY CEED
Institute for Family Health
16 E. 16th St
New York, NY 10003

Phone: 212-633-0800 ext. 1232

Fax: 212-989-2840

www.bronxhealthreach.org



Dear Readers,

The last few months have been a very exciting time in the fight for health equality. In March, after decades of efforts by dedicated advocates and policymakers, we saw comprehensive health care reform become a reality when President Obama signed into law the Affordable Care Act. While we are thrilled that the new law will do much to improve access to health care, we know very well from our 10 years of work that access alone will not be enough to end racial and ethnic health disparities. At the same time that access to primary care and preventative services is being drastically expanded, the segregated system of out patient specialty care in New York

City's academic medical centers persists.

To this day, when patients without insurance and those covered by Medicaid seek specialty care at New York City's academic medical centers, they are sent to hospital clinics. Meanwhile, privately insured patients are sent to faculty practices where they find more experienced doctors, shorter wait times, more coordination of care, and greater access to their physicians outside of office hours. Because patients without insurance or on Medicaid are more likely to be racial and ethnic minorities, this system amounts to a form of segregation.

In this issue we are very pleased to announce that several New York State elected officials have heard the protests of Bronx Health REACH coalition members about this inequity and have championed legislation that would bring an end to this system of segregated care. While these are truly exciting steps in our push for health equality, we know that the fight is far from won. Now more than ever we need to be speaking up, sharing our stories, and bearing witness to this injustice.

We encourage you to read on to learn more about what we, our partners and your neighbors, have been doing over the past months and to learn about how you can get more involved.

Join us. Together we can make health equality a reality.

Sincerely,

Charmaine Ruddock, MS

Project Director

Bronx Health REACH

Community Voices Join to Make Health Equality a Reality

By Diana Mosquera, Program Assistant, Bronx Health REACH

In the spring, over 150 community residents gathered in the auditorium of J.H.S. 22 at 270 East 167th Street in the Bronx for a town hall meeting, *Make Health Equality a Reality*, hosted by Bronx Health REACH. This community town hall meeting was an opportunity to engage in an open dialogue on health disparities and segregation in the health care system with community residents.

At the heart of the town hall meeting were people's stories of health disparity. Several community members shared their experiences with segregated care. Testimonials in-



cluded interactions with providers exhibiting bias and stereotypes in the examination room to experiences with segregated care because of insurance status. Others spoke about ways to overcome discrimination in the health care system on an individual level and as community activists. A panel with a lawyer, doctors, an elected official, and community

activists presented different solutions to the issues that each story highlighted. Doctors spoke about efforts to make sure we have a next generation of doctors who are aware and sensitive to disparities and discrimination in health care and who will work to ensure a system that provides equal access to all who need care. The lawyer and the legislator spoke about legal and legislative solutions to achieve equal access to high quality health care for all.

Audience members were invited to ask questions. Spanish-speaking audience members were able to listen and ask questions in Spanish through a translator. Many in the audience completed feedback forms, and the majority of participants indicated that they would expect more from their doctors from then on.

The NY Daily News and NY1 News covered the town hall meeting, highlighting the issue of segregated care in New York City's private teaching hospitals and the



2008 Civil Rights Complaint filed with New York State Attorney General by Bronx Health REACH and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest. Both pieces can be viewed at www.bronxhealthreach.org

Get Involved! The Health Disparity Workgroup

The idea to have a community event developed out of discussions that had been taking place every month in the Health Disparity Workgroup meetings of community residents and health care advocates. A concern frequently raised in meetings was that the very people affected by disparities in health care are often not aware that they deserve access to high quality health care and that they can join others in advocating for themselves, their family, friends, and their community. The Health Disparity Workgroup meets the second Wednesday of every month at 1:30 pm at Cosmopolitan Church of the Lord Jesus (located at 39 W 190th Street, Bronx, NY). For more information, contact Bernice McFarline at 212-633-0800 x 1232 or BMcFarline@institute2000.org.

Educating Local Elected Officials on Health Disparities and Segregated Care

By Diana Mosquera, Program Assistant, Bronx Health REACH

In the past few months, a number of Bronx Health REACH coalition members have had meetings with

New York City elected officials to provide them with the community's perception on health disparities and

segregated care. To date, several community members along with staff from

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Educating Local Elected Officials on Health Disparities and Segregated Care (continued from p. 2)

Bronx Health REACH and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest have voiced their concerns about the unfairness and unlawfulness of segregating patients into two systems and unequal care based on their insurance type. So far we have met with Assemblypersons Marcos Crespo, Nelson Castro, Adam Clayton Powell IV, Michael Benjamin, Carl Heastie, Vanessa Gibson and Gustavo Rivera; Annabel Palma, Chief of Staff for NYC Councilwoman Meghan K. Lynch; and Aurelia Greene and Melissa Cebollero from the Bronx Borough President’s office. The overall reaction from elected officials has been of concern and acknowledgment that the status quo is causing harm and unnecessary deaths in our communities.

Bronx Health REACH faith-based coordinators Lorna Castro-Morales from Love Power & Grace Church, and Toni Carter from Agape Love Christian Center, attended a meeting with Assemblyman Marcos Crespo (D-NY 85th district). Assemblyman Crespo welcomed meeting participants and was eager to find out where everybody resided. Both Ms. Castro-Morales and Ms. Carter lived in his district and spoke of the devastating impact that heart disease and diabetes has on Bronx residents in Castro’s district. Additionally, both Ms. Castro-Morales and Ms. Carter shared their experiences as patients in the New York City health care system, as health coordinators in their churches, and as health care providers. Impressed by the level of commitment and passion with which both women spoke of the need to

address health disparities in New York City’s private teaching hospitals, Crespo requested further details about the research Bronx Health REACH has done around segregated specialty care. Assemblyman Crespo emphasized his commitment to serve constituents. We followed up with him by sending the requested information.

Another group met with Assemblyman Nelson Castro (D-NY 86th district). Unfortunately, Assemblyman Castro had a last minute engagement and could not attend, however we met with Ada George, Castros’s legislative director. Coalition members present at the meeting included Ms. Mary Walker from Seventh Light Baptist Church, Ms. Aleciah Anthony from North West Bronx Community Clergy Coalition, and Minister Kim Osorio from Gethsemane Baptist Church.

Coalition members also met with Assemblyman Adam Clayton Powell, IV (D-NY 68th district). Attendees included Reverend Edward Tinsley from Bethlehem Judah Missionary Baptist Church, Mrs. Mary Tinsley from Bronx Shepherds Restoration Corp., Ms. Toni Carter from Agape Love Christian Center, Ms. Eleanor McKay from Church of God of Prophecy, Ms. Nisha Agarwal, JD, from New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, and Minister Kim Osorio from Gethsemane Baptist Church. Coalition members spoke of REACH’s work to end health disparities by encouraging healthier lifestyles through such programs as the Culinary Initiative, God’s Health Squad, and Fine, Fit, and Fabulous,

while fighting to end discrimination in health care. The Assemblyman’s attention was directed to the Attorney General complaint citing segregated care practices at Mount Sinai Medical Center, located in his district.

Coalition members Reverend Edward Tinsley, Mrs. Mary Tinsley, and Deacon Joseph Ellis from Bronx Deliverance Center of Faith met with Assemblyman Michael Benjamin (D-79th district). Assemblyman Benjamin was familiar with our work, and expressed his long-term support for Bronx Health REACH and interest in introducing or co-sponsoring legislation to address the issue of health disparities. Since the visit, Assemblyman Benjamin introduced bill A11134 based on recommendations from Bronx Health REACH. If passed, this legislation will hold all New York City private teaching hospitals accountable for providing all patients with the same high quality health care regardless of insurance or income. The Assemblyman was also a panelist during Bronx Health REACH’s “Make Health Equality A Reality” community town hall meeting.

On two occasions coalition members met with Assemblyman Carl Heastie, who has been very receptive to issues regarding access to quality health care. Community members Ms. Toni Carter and Pastor Veda Grampus from Agape Love Christian Center met with the Assemblyman at the beginning of the year. At that meeting, Mr. Heastie promised to support the coalition’s effort to be part of the *(continued on next page)*



Educating Local Elected Officials on Health Disparities and Segregated Care (continued from p. 3)

agenda during the Black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic & Asian February Caucus in Albany. More recently, Ms. Icelyn Ayo from Grand Concourse Seventh Day Adventist Church, Ms. Evelina Irish-Spencer from Cornell Cooperative Extension, and Reverend Dr. Robert Foley Sr. from Cosmopolitan Church of the Lord Jesus attended a follow up meeting with Assemblyman Heastie in July. Nisha Agarwal, JD explained the health equality bill recently introduced in the New York State Assembly. Assemblyman Heastie explained that, due to current issues with the New York State budget, new bills will not get proper attention. Nevertheless, he stated his support for our cause and interest in finding out more about our 2008 Civil Rights complaint with NYS Attorney General Cuomo. Ms. Agarwal sent Mr. Heastie the full 2008 complaint following our meeting.

Meeting with elected officials allows coalition members an opportunity to explain to elected officials how health disparities affect their communities, as well as share their thoughts on why outlawing segregated care is critical in achieving the highest quality care for all. If you are interested in participating in future meetings please e-mail Bernice McFarline at BMcfarline@institute2000.org or Alyssa Aguilera at Aaguilera@nylpi.org. You may also contact us at 212-633-0800 x 1232.

Attorney General Debate

By Barbara Backer (Bronx Health REACH Coalition member)

I, along with REACH staff members Bernice McFarline, Carlos Devia, and Jill Linnell and NYLPI staff attorney Shena Elrington, attended the Attorney General televised debate sponsored by New York Community Media Alliance in September. The debate was essentially a press conference hosted by the ethnic media press.

Four Democratic candidates for the position of Attorney General of New York State participated in the debate: Richard Brodsky, Sean Coffey, Eric Donello and Eric Schneiderman. The candidates discussed their positions on the economy, jobs, immigration and government’s role in business regulation. During the question and answer period, Shena, speaking on behalf of Bronx Health REACH and NYLPI, noted that in 2008 we had submitted to the current Attorney General (AG) a complaint that in some NYC teaching hospitals, disparities in the delivery of health care to patients with Medicaid Insurance exists and that to date the AG had not taken action on this complaint. She asked the candidates how, if elected, each would be responsive to the needs and requests of the community. All four candidates responded that they could not comment on an issue currently under investigation but that they would look into such a request once they received more information about it.

After the debate, NYLPI sent all the candidates information about our complaint and all candidates received copies of our press release, as did the media. Eric Schneiderman had received our information at a prior campaign event and included our health disparities issue in his Campaign Agenda for the Office of New York State Attorney General: “..... Sadly, in New York and elsewhere, race, poverty, ethnicity and language too often play a critical – and improper – role in health care options and outcomes. That role often manifests itself in the disparate treatment that patients receive based on whether they have public or private health insurance. With passage of federal health care reform and the planned expansion of public health care, it is more critical than ever to enforce laws that prohibit Medicaid providers such as hospitals and clinics from discriminating against patients because they have public, as opposed to private insurance. The Attorney General’s office is well-suited for a leading role in investigating racial and ethnic disparities in health care....” I hope that if Mr. Schneiderman does get elected he won’t forget or retreat from this commitment.



Health Equality Bill

By Nisha Agarwal, JD, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest

This past May, the Bronx Health REACH Coalition and its legal partner, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest (NYLPI), found sponsors to introduce legislation in the New York State Senate and Assembly (S7807 & A11134) that aims to end segregated care in New York City academic-medical centers. These identical bills will require hospitals to deliver care in an integrated setting where all patients are seen in the same place with the same technologies and staff. This will ensure that all patients receive high quality health care – not just those who can afford it.

This legislation comes from more than a decade of advocacy in the South Bronx directed towards ending racial and ethnic health disparities. For many years, the Bronx Health REACH Coalition has been concerned that hospitals operate in a way that systematically excludes low-income patients from accessing high quality care. In particular, patients at NYC academic-medical centers are separated into a two-tiered system of outpatient specialty care depending on their insurance type. Patients with private insurance are seen in private doctors’ offices (called “Faculty Practices”) within the hospital, while patients on public insurance or who are uninsured are seen in the “Clinic” system. By separating patients based on payment type, the result is a form of racial segregation since black and Latino patients are the majority of people who are on Medicaid or who are uninsured in NY.

Although many clinics provide excellent care and we recognize their important role in training student

physicians, they still remain underfunded and under supported by their parent institutions. As a result, the clinics have long wait times, far fewer board-certified physicians, and lesser access to the highest quality of technology. This is a major problem for those that need specialty care for chronic health conditions like diabetes, cancer, heart disease, etc. This bill will ensure that all patients are seen in the same place and at the same time, so academic medical centers will no longer have an incentive to provide more resources to the faculty practices while allowing the clinics to struggle.

Although we understand the current economic restraints on NYC hospitals, let us not be confused about the “charity” involved in providing care to medically underserved communities. The academic-medical centers affected by our legislation have benefited from millions of dollars in federal and state funding. In taking money from taxpayers, these institutions are obligated to provide care to the publicly insured and uninsured populations. In supporting this bill, we are simply asking for an equitable distribution of services to all patients.

The passage of this legislation will not be easy, but if successful could dramatically improve the quality of health care for many New Yorkers. In the coming months we will be asking for wide-spread support for this legislation and are looking for supporters who can champion this bill and encourage their legislators to do the same. We need your support! Please join us in this endeavor.

Bronx Health REACH 2010 Pastors’ Breakfast

By: Diana Mosquera, Program Assistant, Bronx Health REACH

In June, a number of faith-based leaders attended a Bronx Health REACH 2010 Pastors’ Breakfast to lend their support to the fight for the elimination of health disparities.

Neil Calman, M.D., President and CEO of the Institute for Family Health and Principal Investigator of Bronx Health REACH, spoke of the disparity and

inequality that existed in the health care system 30 years ago when he was beginning his medical career. He pointed out that back then, patients on Medicaid and those uninsured were referred to as “service cases” which meant that they were the patients on whom residents and medical students practiced their new medical skills and knowledge while never

being allowed to treat the privately insured patients. He reminded the group that this unfortunate practice is still in place in many New York City private teaching hospitals where patients are steered into “hospital clinics” and most often see residents for their health care needs.

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Bronx Health REACH 2010 Pastors' Breakfast (continued)

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“A sick congregation can't bring vitality to the surrounding community”

Nisha Agarwal, Director of the Health Justice Program at The New York Lawyers for the Public Interest and the lawyer who filed Bronx Health REACH's complaint with the New York State Attorney General against hospitals practicing segregated care, explained the urgency to support newly introduced legislation that addresses segregated health care in New York City. Ms. Agarwal explained that the practice of many hospitals to separate patients based on their health insurance status results in many patients receiving separate and unequal care. She explained that current legislative efforts led by Bronx Health REACH, if successful, will change the status quo and uphold fairness in our health care system.

Reverend Dr. J Albert Bush Sr., Senior Pastor of Walker Memorial Baptist Church, challenged the pastors to be the voice of the voiceless because “a sick congregation can't bring vitality to the surrounding community.” Rev. Bush addressed the lack of action from Attorney General Andrew Cuomo on Bronx Health REACH's Civil Rights complaint filed in 2008. He asked, “how can Cuomo, who is now seeking to become New York State Governor, be trusted that he will represent the issues that affect our communities so adversely if we are still waiting for him to take action on the segregated care issue in the 2008 complaint?”

“Health disparity is the Civil Rights struggle of our time.”

“Discrimination comes in all types and forms”, said Lydia Sierra from Jehovah Shammah Family Institute. Lydia spoke about how to bring social justice to pastors' ministries. She moderated an invigorating discussion on strategies to build the movement to end health disparity. One participant stated that health disparity is the Civil Rights struggle of our time.

“What hurts you, hurts me in today's deadly segregated system of health care.”

Reverend Dr. Robert Foley Sr., from Cosmopolitan Church of the Lord Jesus issued a Call to Action. He repeatedly stated that we are asking for fairness in health care. Rev. Foley called on the pastors present to urge other pastors to become involved, because of the life or death nature of this problem. He reminded those present that people are dying unnecessarily because of a discriminatory health care system and that we need to resolve this issue ourselves. “For a long time I thought the system was being fair, I



From left to right: Joyce A. Davis, Carlos Devia, Rev. Dr. Robert Foley Sr., Charmaine Ruddock, Nisha Agarwal, Alyssa Aguilera, Neil Calman, MD, and Diana Mosquera.

did not know about the two-tiered system,” said Rev. Foley, who stressed the need for more witnesses who had experienced the dismal effects of such an unfair system to come forward. He closed the Call to Action by urging those present to become more involved and bring others along, because “what hurts you, hurts me in today's deadly segregated system of health care.”

Health Disparity Research and Resources

We have listed a few resources that have more information to assist and inform you about health disparities, and how to successfully get the health care you need. These materials can be found online or at your local library.

- New York Lawyers in the Public Interest Health blog: <http://healthjustice.wordpress.com/>
- National Health Law Program: www.healthlaw.org
- Health Policy Institute at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies: <http://jointcenter.org/hpi/>
- Calman, Neil, et al. 2006. Separate and Unequal Care in New York City. *Journal of Health Care Law & Policy*. Vol. 9, No. 1: 105-120.
- Hilfiker, David. 1994. Not All of Us Are Saints: A Doctor's Journey with the Poor. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Vigen, Aana Marie. 2006. Women, Ethics, and Inequality in the U.S. Healthcare: “The Count among the Living.” New York: Palgrave Macmillan.