

Collaboration at its Best

Partnerships Key to Reducing Health Disparities

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA

Closing the Gap, First Summit Packs the House • January/February 2003

According to Dr. Robert Ross, president and CEO of the California Endowment, there are no easy answers when it comes to solving the health care crisis facing racial and ethnic minorities in this country. But, with the help of his organization and others like it, numerous efforts across the country are helping to make quality health care more accessible and affordable, and improving the health outcomes of many Americans.

Dr. Ross was one of the headline keynote speakers for this year's National Leadership Summit where he addressed nearly 2,000 attendees at the luncheon plenary session on the importance of building public-private partnerships to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health. Joining him during this well attended and popular session was Dr. James R. Gavin III, incoming president of Morehouse Medical School. In their separate remarks, both mirrored one another on the importance of developing and sustaining effective public-private partnerships as a key strategy to solving many of the complex challenges associated with eliminating disparities in health—encompassing every aspect of the health care and its related systems.

According to Dr. Ross, the importance of building effective partnerships is helped considerably by one's ability to build an "effective constituency."

"We need to take stock internally of our own ability to build an effective strategy and execute," he said. "Execution always trumps strategy. You execute a strategy to build a constituency to create the political environment under which people can act," he added.

Dr. Ross went on talking about what some may call "a subject that may be a little bit uncomfortable." "I'm going to put something on the table. I'm disturbed that if black folks are in this corner talking about what they must have on disparities and Latinos are in that corner talking about what they deserve and American Indians and Alaska Natives are over in their corners, the disabilities are kind of way over there in that corner, I'm afraid that we will lose a marvelous opportunity to form an extraordinary coalition . . . We cannot afford to be splintered on this issue," Ross said.

"The goals of eliminating health disparities cannot be achieved without a concerted and sustained effort on the development of effective, integrated, inter-agency, and cross-organizational partnerships between the public and private sectors," said Dr. Gavin.

"To make real progress on eliminating racial and ethnic disparities in this country, the full integrated participation of partners that comprise the public and private biomedical, epidemiological, clinical and behavioral research sectors, the social policy and health economy sector, health and healthcare training programs, the political sector, healthcare administration, especially managed care, public health workers and thought leaders, community- and faith-based organizations, private industry, philanthropy and

an informed and empowered citizenry will all be required to achieve this goal," Gavin added.

Each year, private sector organizations such as the California Endowment, Ford Foundation, Kaiser Family Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the Gates Foundation provide millions of dollars of funding to address core health issues. Without the resources expended by private sector foundations—in partnership with a wide range of other organizations—critical research and communication campaigns aimed at reducing racial and ethnic disparities

in medical care would not be possible. It is through these collaborative efforts that quality health care programs are made available to consumers, which may otherwise not exist.

Cory Hoze, HHS Regional Director for Region V in Chicago, and plenary session moderator added that alliances underscore the importance of public-private partnerships working together and sharing resources and expertise to reduce disparities in health. "The Federal government itself, even working with state and local governments, cannot achieve its ultimate goal without building strong partnerships with the private sector," Hoze said. "HHS believes that building meaningful partnerships is key to achieving our goal of eliminating racial health disparities," he added.

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Partnerships at Work

When viewed on a broad scale, the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health may seem overwhelming and impossible to solve. However, Federal, state, and local public-private initiatives across the country offer hope that positive changes in the health status of minorities is possible. Moreover, community-based programs have made great progress in increasing access to care and improving the delivery of quality health care services.

Partnership activities are expanding throughout the country. The California Endowment is one example of the public and private sectors working together to reduce disparities in health. Created in 1996, the California Endowment is a private, statewide health foundation with \$3.1 billion in assets. Through October 2002, the Endowment has awarded more than 3,400 grants totaling more than \$968 million to community-based organizations throughout California. The Foundation's goal is to expand access to affordable quality health care for underserved individuals and communities within the state. The California Endowment expects to distribute more than \$200 million in funds over the next five years.

"In order to help us achieve these goals, we firmly believe in the principle that communities must serve as the driving force for effecting change," said Dr. Ross. "Partnerships and alliances with key stakeholders to advance a health and well-being

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agenda are critical. Whether with our grantees, fellow foundations, state government, or others, we recognize the power of working together to leverage our resources.”

All present seemed to agree that there is strength in numbers. Maximizing resources is a cost-effective benefit of creating partnerships. “Whether through financial support or human sweat equity, innovative strategies can be employed to reach the desired goal,” Dr. Ross said.

Like the California Endowment, other foundations and health-related organizations have recognized the importance of building collaborative partnerships to make best use of resources and to have the greatest impact on eliminating health disparities. On the national level, the Kaiser Family Foundation funds activities in minority health focused on efforts to reduce disparities specifically in health care access, such as policy research analysis and media and public education activities. Likewise, through its philanthropy efforts, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation partners with hospitals, medical, nursing, and public schools, hospices, professional associations, research organizations, state and local government agencies, and community groups by funding training, education, research, and projects aimed at delivering quality health care services.

While the impact of public-private partnerships through national foundations, organizations and government is unquestionable,

partnerships formed at the grassroots level can also yield significant results. According to Dr. Gavin, the key is to explore all of the possibilities. “Community- and faith-based organizations within the private sector are critical to effective partnerships, Dr. Gavin said. “It’s because they are the most credible and persistent voices of individual accountability,” he added.

Gavin further believes that more can be done to leverage resources and create additional partnership opportunities. “I think that we have underutilized the potential of foundations,” said Gavin. “Likewise, we have underutilized the potential of the pharmaceutical industry as a partner in elimination of disparities,” he said.

Dr. Gavin stressed the need to be creative in the way all of us perform our public and private partnerships, assign resource allocation and promote integration of messages across the health system. “By focusing on new or more effective ways of developing these partnerships and allocating resources to address and eliminate health disparities, I believe we will provide the necessary forums and dialogs and the mechanisms for assaying whether we are targeting funds and human capital in the right direction for achievement of this increasingly urgent goal for the whole of society,” he said.

For more information on the organizations included herein, please contact the Office of Minority Health Resource Center at 800-444-6472. ❖

