

# Congressional Black Caucus Holds Spring Health Braintrust

## New Chair provides more audience interaction, community feedback

By Jennifer Brooks

Closing the Gap-HIV/AIDS • April 1999

Some had tears in their eyes. Others clutched hands firmly as they remembered fallen loved ones. Everyone was there for the same reason—to talk about HIV and AIDS.

“At a high school right down the street from where I live, 60 percent of the students during a blood drive were found to be HIV infected. The senior class of a high school in Tennessee—a black high school—had an 80 percent HIV infection rate. There’s a high school in the Bronx that has a 75 percent infection rate. What do you think that means? That means extinction,” according to Abdul Alim Muhammad, MD, of the Abundant Life Clinic in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Muhammad was one of several speakers at the Congressional Black Caucus’ (CBC) annual Spring Health Braintrust, held on April 15-16, 1999, in Washington, DC. The audience joined in candid discussions on the HIV/AIDS and substance abuse crisis, and other important issues including heart disease, stroke, cancer, infant mortality, diabetes, immunizations and violence. The two-day event focused on recommending policy and developing community-based strategies to address the overarching factors that prevent African Americans from achieving optimal health.

“This year, we provided more opportunity for the audience to shape policy,” said the Braintrust Chair, Donna M. Christian-Christensen, U.S. Virgin Islands Delegate. “We wanted people who attended—people who know their communities best—to tell us how we can better close the gaps in health status in their communities.”

The Braintrust also impaneled nationally reknowned experts on minority health, including Dr. Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Harvard School of Public Health; Dr. Harold Freeman, Director of Surgery, Harlem Hospital Center; Dr. Reed Tuckson, Sr. Vice President for

Professional Standards, American Medical Association; Dr. Gary Dennis, President, National Medical Association; Dr. Eric Goosby, Director, HIV/AIDS, Office, Department of Health and Human Services; Deborah Fraser-Howze, President, National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS; and Dr. John Ruffin, Director, Office of Research on Minority Health, National Institutes of Health.

After breaking into groups, Braintrust participants—expert panelists, Congressional staffers, community organizers and advocates—looked at and discussed factors that contribute to the significant disparities in health status between African Americans and other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. Representatives from each group then reported out to the audience and to Congresswoman Christian-Christensen, who will later present the recommendations to the entire CBC.

On Thursday, April 15, the CBC held a technical assistance session for community groups to learn about gaining access to some of the \$156 million in federal funding for HIV/AIDS. According to Congresswoman Christian-Christensen, “This was the first time we were able to provide technical assistance at one of these events.”

Later that evening, the CBC held a reception honoring former Congressman Louis Stokes, who served as chair of the Health Braintrust for more than 20 years. Congresswoman Christian-Christensen is only the second Braintrust chairperson since the event began.

*For more information, browse Congresswoman Christian-Christensen’s Web site at: <http://www.house.gov/christian-christensen/>. Proceedings are now available on the Web at: <http://www.menlanet.com/urbanhealthcast/>. ♦*

