

Minority Health Entities Impact State Health Disparities

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The United States is comprised of 59 states, districts, and territories—each uniquely defined by its topography, natural resources, and by the diversity of its people. The varying cultures, languages, races and ethnicities of individuals living in states across the nation pose equally unique challenges for health officials as they work to eliminate their own state's health disparities.

State minority health entities continue to serve as pivotal points for federal, state, tribal, and local efforts to improve the health status of minority populations. They have the ability to tackle head-on the cross-cutting issues in which the Office of Minority Health (OMH) is involved. Yet many states still lack sufficient resources to help them address minority health issues.

That is why OMH developed the State Partnership Initiative in 1998. We wanted to help individual state minority health entities develop or expand their existing infrastructure to address their specific public health needs, while at the same time helping us increase our involvement with the states. The one-year contracts also allowed some states to undertake special projects to address emerging health-related issues impacting minority communities.

Through the initiative, 25 state offices shared approximately \$733,000 to develop programs that impact state-wide racial and ethnic health disparities. Some state offices, such as Ohio and North Carolina, used the funding toward innovative programs that improve access to care and address data issues (see articles *Ohio Turns to Hispanic Community to Develop Data Publication* and *North Carolina OMH Improves Availability of Health Data*). Others directed the funds toward infrastructure development, like Tennessee's establishment of a Latino Network (see article *Tennessee Creates Latino Network*).

In FY 2000 OMH awarded 12 new states—many of which do not have established state minority health entities—with approximately \$285,000. For these states, the initiative provides an opportunity to reach minority populations with special projects they might not otherwise have been able to do.

OMH recently completed an assessment of the minority health infrastructure in eight states and Puerto Rico. One of the important study questions of this assessment was whether the existence of state minority health entities made a difference in how/if states were addressing racial and ethnic health disparities. The study found that despite the many challenges facing the state minority health entities, they are an organized and visible presence

at the state policymaking level that provides numerous opportunities to shape and create initiatives that could affect the health status of minority populations.

They also serve an important information dissemination function, providing information on minority health issues to policymakers, health professionals, community-based organizations, and the general public. State minority health entities also serve as important and visible points of contact in their states.

We know that improving the health of racial and ethnic minorities helps ensure the health of all Americans. We also know that state minority health entities can play an increasing role in the efforts to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities in health. Therefore, we must continue to urge our state health policymakers to put minority health on their agendas, especially if they are serious about closing the gaps in health in their states and the nation. Minority health is everyone's health.

For more information on the OMH State Health Partnership Initiative, call Gerrie Maccannon at (301) 443-5084. ❖

