

The Health Divide is growing for African Americans *By Alameda County Supervisor Keith Carson*

SOUND THE ALARM - THIS IS AN EMERGENCY! African Americans are dying at an alarming rate in Alameda County. Did you know that the death rate for African Americans is more than 50% higher than for any other ethnic group in the county? Did you know that while blacks make up 17 % of the County's population they are the number one ethnic group in the County to die from heart disease, stroke, breast cancer, prostate cancer, homicide, accidents, AIDS...the list goes on. Our County Public Health Officials and the City of Berkeley Health Department recently presented these statistics, among a long list of others, to the Alameda County Board of Supervisors.

For the first time since 1993, the County Health Department compiled a report on the health status of County residents. Their preliminary report was issued in April; the final report will be released in June of this year. The report presents a bleak picture for African Americans in Alameda County. The report indicates, among other things, that:

- The rate of AIDS among African Americans is five times higher than the case rate for Whites or Hispanics;
- African American children are more than three times as likely to die during their first year of life than children of any other racial/ethnic group.

The City of Berkeley's statistics echoed those of the County. According to the City's Public Health Department:

- African American women who gave birth in Berkeley are five times more likely to give birth to a low birthweight baby than their White counterparts;
- In Berkeley the mortality gap between residents in the hills and in the flat lands is 9 years; this means that your life expectancy is 9 years shorter if you live in South or West Berkeley than if you live in North Berkeley or the Hills.

My initial reaction to these reports was one of shock and anger. I struggled to understand the disparities between African Americans and neighboring ethnic groups of similar socio-economic status. It is inexplicable to me how to justify the huge difference in the health status of African Americans and their different race neighbors who shop at the same markets and live in the same conditions. These problems are not just about health. There are a multitude of factors which must be considered to begin to explain the widening health divide between African Americans and other ethnic groups in the County.

These factors must be looked at holistically. A public health approach to these health indicators can only carry us so far. We need to heighten the collaboration, improve data collection, and expand the service delivery to significantly impact health status. We

cannot allow ourselves to lag behind our ethnic counterparts in an area as essential as health care. We must take up the challenge to study and discover the causes of disproportionate illness and death of African Americans and work aggressively until the trend is reversed.

On April 19, 2000, Congresswoman Barbara Lee and I, along with a host of community organizations held a town hall meeting at Progressive Baptist Church in Berkeley. The meeting was a first step in beginning a community dialogue to identify the causes of this glaring health divide and to fashion community appropriate solutions about what should be done to address these disparities.

Over 200 people attended the meeting. They heard presentations from the City of Berkeley Health Officer, Dr. Poki Namkung; the Director of Maternal & Child Health for the City of Berkeley, Dr. Vicki Alexander; Alameda County Public Health Officer, Dr. Arthur Chen; and the Director of Public Health for Alameda County, Arnold Perkins. These presentations were followed by an impressive panel of health professionals who fielded questions from the audience. The panelists included Dr. Frank Staggers of the Ethnic Health Institute and Sinkler Miller Medical Association; Dr. Melanie Tervalon of the County Children & Families First Commission; Dr. John Norton of the West Oakland Health Council; Dr. Mark Alexander from the University of California at San Francisco; and Mildred Thompson with Policy Link.

At the conclusion of the town hall meeting, a group was formed to specifically look at Berkeley's health disparities. The group's first meeting will be held in May. I am hopeful that other African American individuals and groups in the County will expand this dialogue beyond Berkeley. Please call my Legislative Aide on Health Care, Lara Bice, at (510) 272-6685 for more information.