

## From *The Nation's Health*, February 2004

### California plots strategy to end health disparities

After years of work, public health advocates in California recently presented a strategic plan aimed at eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities in one of the nation's largest and most diverse states.

Released at APHA's 2003 Annual Meeting in San Francisco in November, "Health For All: California's Strategic Approach to Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities" targets the conditions and environments that cause minorities to experience illness and disease more often and more severely than the overall population. The strategic plan was developed by the California Campaign to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health, which consists of health officials, workers and advocates from across California and the nation and is co-chaired by APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP.

The campaign has two main goals: to prevent illness and injury by encouraging healthy environments and behaviors and to lower the severity of illness and injury by providing everyone with access to high-quality health care.

"The emphasis of this plan that differs from others is preventing problems before they arise and really taking a step back and looking at social and environmental determinants - it provides the best conceptual basis for eliminating disparities," said Larry Cohen, MSW, a member of the campaign's executive committee and chair-elect of APHA's Injury Control and Emergency Health Services Section.

Cohen said the strategic plan's primary audiences are health and community officials throughout California who are concerned about improving health and, in particular, about preventing ill health. He noted that the strategic plan could also be used as a model for other state officials attempting to tackle health disparities.

"I think that California mirrors the nation in terms of diversity," Cohen told *The Nation's Health*. "It's the energy and innovation in California which helped develop this plan and there's such energy and innovation throughout the country."

The strategic plan points out that the factors that contribute to health disparities are broad and complex, encompassing issues such as poor education, dilapidated housing conditions, limited job opportunities and ready availability of inexpensive high-fat foods - all factors that are prominent in low-income areas where minorities are more likely to reside. Among the priority medical issues for California as they relate to racial and ethnic health disparities are cardiovascular disease, breast cancer, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, infant mortality and mental health, according to the strategic plan.

"If you take a step back and ask why are people getting sick in the first place, why are people dying prematurely and unjustly, what you see are

certain key determinants of their health, and those determinants are not primarily in the health care system, but throughout the community and the environment," Cohen said.

The campaign's next step is distributing the plan and translating the strategies into specific action steps, according to Cohen, who added that "public health must be the fulcrum" of efforts to eliminate health disparities.

For a copy of the California plan, visit [www.preventioninstitute.org](http://www.preventioninstitute.org) or [www.apha.org/ppp](http://www.apha.org/ppp).

- *Kim Krisberg*