

HEALTH REPORT

WHY “PLACE MATTERS” IN THE STATE OF THE UNION

By Gail C. Christopher

In his State of the Union address on January 23, 2007, President Bush made a regrettable omission: he failed to make any reference to the continued plight of residents in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast region who are still struggling with post-Katrina reconstruction, as well as persistent racial and ethnic disparities in quality of life. Their ongoing needs are acute and the national response, particularly to the public health needs of these devastated communities, is woefully inadequate as of January 2007. Every system in New Orleans—education, housing, transportation, public health, energy, communication, and justice—is still crippled.

The kinds of interventions that are needed to solve such long-term problems require leadership from all levels of government. While leadership at the federal level is clearly needed, robust, compassionate, and competent leadership may also come from collaborations between individuals in the private sector and those in state and local government.

The Joint Center Health Policy Institute (HPI) is working to do just that with its national *Place Matters* initiative, which seeks to reduce health disparities by helping local leaders address their complex underlying causes. While researchers have determined that altering social determinants can affect individual well-being and modify health patterns and risks for illness, systematic translation and application of this research and theory into policy and practice has been limited, particularly within local communities.

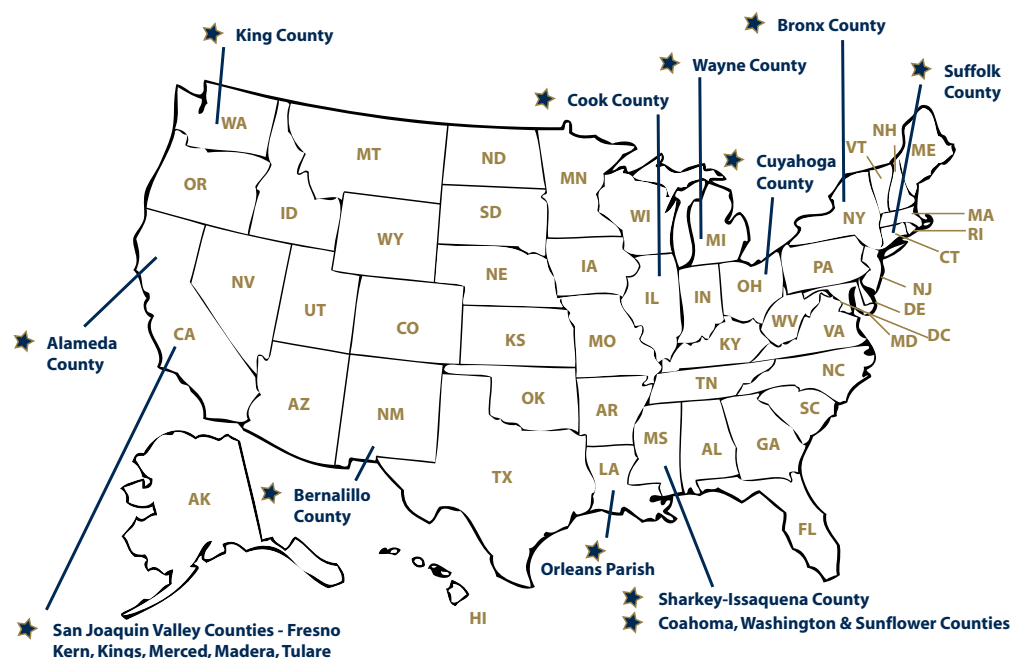
HPI is working with leadership teams from 22 counties in 13 states to design and implement creative approaches to reduce racial and ethnic health disparities. These teams are made up of leaders from different sectors in local regions and communities; they include educators, public health workers, community activists, faith-based organization leaders, as well as public sector representatives. Members of the teams participate in Design Laboratories where learning, information sharing, and group planning occurs.

HPI Perspectives on the Social Determinants of Health

Social determinants of health refer to conditions of society that reflect *root causes* of community and individual health and well-being. Such causes include but are not limited to quality and affordability of housing, level of employment and job security, standard of living, availability of mass transportation, quality of education, forms of clean economic development, racism, poverty, distribution of goods and services, chronic stress, and workplace conditions.

Many public/community health practitioners struggle with the notion that their programs should address social issues. Many public health leaders question the idea of their departments taking on deep-rooted injustices related to racial and class discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantage, poor housing stock, and myriad other social forces that drive population health status.

COUNTIES ENGAGED IN THE JOINT CENTER HEALTH POLICY INSTITUTE'S *PLACE MATTERS* INITIATIVE



Public health practitioners are busy focusing on their mission to provide everyday public health services, such as preventing the spread of West Nile Virus, inspecting restaurants, running family planning programs, providing immunizations, and conducting communicable disease surveillance.

These concerns are understandable. Indeed, public health agencies simply cannot address these issues alone, nor should one agency attempt to do so. But the need to address persistent population health challenges nonetheless exists, and it will take systematic efforts that include participation at the local level to address these challenges.

Progress through *Place Matters*

HPI's *Place Matters* initiative responds to this urgent need. It recognizes that social determinants of health theory must be translated into practice. And the response from local leadership teams has been extraordinary.

In different cities around the country, the *Place Matters* leadership teams have gathered together for three-day retreats during the last year and made collective and individual progress toward unraveling the complex maze of how social determinants can and do contribute to health disparities.

Their approaches vary significantly. One team has decided to tackle racism head on, while another is creating a business rationale to support their decision to ensure primary care medical homes (homes that provide access to regular and sustained primary medical care) for everyone. Members of another group have joined forces to design a regional approach to improving

transportation options for migrant farm workers, while yet another team has decided to address the difficult issues surrounding building decisions and ordinances that contribute to either unhealthy or health-promoting "built environments." The teams are still formulating and refining their strategies. Even at this early stage, however, it is clear that their collective and individual creativity, coupled with this real chance for creating a supported community of practice, is leading to new and exciting approaches to addressing health disparities.

THE JOINT CENTER
HEALTH POLICY
INSTITUTE'S *PLACE*
MATTERS INITIATIVE
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HEALTH DISPARITIES BY
HELPING LOCAL LEADERS
ADDRESS THEIR COMPLEX
UNDERLYING CAUSES.

Partnering to Achieve Change

The Joint Center Health Policy Institute is partnering with several national organizations to implement *Place Matters*. Key partners include the National Association of Counties, the International City/County Management Association, and the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO). With the help of these and other state and

local public officials, administrators, and community leaders, as well as the Joint Center's DataBank, data from 149 counties across the country are being assessed and will be used to guide the *Place Matters* Design Lab teams.

For example, the pioneering work of the Connecticut Association of Directors of Health, Inc. (CADH), in partnership with NACCHO, on the Social Determinants of Health Equity Index (SDHEI) is helping to inform the data components of the *Place Matters* initiative. The SDHEI provides a portrait of social, economic, and environmental conditions related to inequities in health. This represents a groundbreaking tool in that it has the capacity to locate, quantify, and measure social determinants that lead to health disparities between different population groups. For instance, employment, housing availability, and poverty rates are correlated with issues such as infant mortality, morbidity associated with chronic disease, and premature or excess deaths. While this tool is still in the final stages of development, its assumptions and components are guiding the *Place Matters* work.

The Joint Center is particularly pleased that New Orleans (Orleans Parish) is among the first group of counties participating in *Place Matters*. This city and parish embody the race and class divisions that contribute to needless human suffering. The post-Katrina and Rita devastation revealed longstanding social and economic inequalities that are too often associated with health disparities. Through their participation in *Place Matters*, New Orleans' public health, education, and community leaders have the support of a larger community of peers as they struggle to recover and achieve a better quality of life for residents. While these first steps toward reducing racial and ethnic health disparities are not a replacement for committed leadership at the federal level, they provide encouragement for the many communities who struggle with such disparities and whose well-being represents an important part of the state of the union. □

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PLACE MATTERS PARTNERS

- W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
- ATLANTA NEIGHBORHOOD DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP
- THE CALIFORNIA ENDOWMENT
- THE CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF HEALTH
- CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF HEALTH
- HENRY J. KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION
- INTERNATIONAL CITY/COUNTY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES
- NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY AND CITY HEALTH OFFICIALS (NACCHO)
- NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF BLACK COUNTY OFFICIALS
- POLICYLINK
- THE PRAXIS PROJECT