

Strengthening research and community partnerships in the Gulf

More than 80 researchers and community partners gathered for the NIEHS Deepwater Horizon Research Consortia stakeholder meeting Feb. 22-23 in New Orleans. The meeting, which included broad representation from affected Gulf communities, helped community partners understand the purpose, scope, and potential outcomes of the consortia's research.

The five-year, \$25 million consortia [program](#) is examining the effects of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill on human health in Gulf Coast communities, with the goal of improving community preparedness and minimizing disaster-related health impacts from factors such as stress and exposure to contaminants.

"Despite the somewhat different goals for scientists and community partners involved in the Deepwater Horizon consortia, we all want good results to come out of the research," said NIEHS Program Administrator Symma Finn, Ph.D., in her welcoming remarks. "We want to empower our community partners with more knowledge about the science, and acknowledge the great work each organization is doing to help those in their own communities."

Active community partnerships are vital to the value of the research, and face-to-face interactions give representatives, from both scientific and community perspectives, an opportunity to network, talk about their experiences, and share best practices. The meeting optimized coordination across the consortia by bringing together the investigators working on similar topics, and provided a forum for greater interaction among the scientists in the consortia, staff engaged in community outreach and research dissemination, and community partners.

Giving voice to community concerns

Claudia Thompson, Ph.D., NIEHS program lead for the consortia, provided a framework for the event, with an overview of the four consortia studies that are being led by research teams from the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston (UTMB), the University of Florida, Tulane University, and Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center New Orleans. These studies include active partnerships with nearly 40 community organizations across the Gulf Coast states.

Posters and presentations by the community members highlighted the diverse activities being undertaken by local organizations in support of consortia research, and confirmed the level of commitment of these groups to the success of the program. Leaders from various organizations described training for community partners, data collection and analysis methodologies, and, importantly, outreach and educational activities.

Highly interactive working sessions highlighted the importance of community partners to the progress and success of the research. Comments during these sessions included addressing needs for:



Charles Wilson, Ph.D., chief scientific officer of the Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative, provided the plenary talk and an overview on the Gulf ecosystem. He described the toxicity of oil dispersant and how oil migrated post-spill. Other speakers included Elizabeth Fontham, Dr.P.H., of Tulane University, who presented on epidemiological research; Jeffrey Wickliffe, Ph.D., of Tulane University, who spoke on risk communications; and Marylee Orr of the Louisiana Environmental Action Network, who shared her experiences in community capacity building. (Photo courtesy of Andy Kane, University of Florida)



Joe Taylor, executive director of Franklin's Promise Coalition, represented one of 39 community organizations in the New Orleans meeting. "We are so very grateful for the opportunity and for the encouragement to communicate openly," Taylor said. "This has been a wonderful experience for our organization, and now I see that it's beginning to affect our grass roots community." (Photo courtesy of Andy Kane, University of Florida)

- Sustainability of the academic-community partnerships beyond the project term.
- A greater focus on investigations of mental health outcomes in Gulf communities.
- Cultural competence when communicating with affected community members.
- Coordination with fishermen regarding messaging about seafood safety.

Additionally, some partners made clear the need for better translation of science to communities, and others expressed concern about resource needs and lack of access to services, which, although outside the purview of the consortia research, does highlight issues affecting the resilience of affected communities.

Overall, the meeting succeeded in building trust and increased the capacity for research effectiveness across the consortia.



One of the key themes of the meeting was the importance of research translation. Tap Bui, community organizer and health outreach coordinator of the Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation, spoke of the need to communicate research activities using culturally appropriate language and formats. (Photo courtesy of Andy Kane, University of Florida)



Tracy Irani, Ph.D., director of the University of Florida Community Outreach and Dissemination Core, and Kees Elferink, Ph.D., lead researcher at UTMB, benefit from cross-consortia networking. (Photo courtesy of Andy Kane, University of Florida)



Taras Carter, senior program coordinator at Tulane University, spoke about the resources, relevant skills, and scientific literacy that community members can bring to the research table. (Photo courtesy of Andy Kane, University of Florida)

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