

Partners advance justice and parity in environmental public health

By Ernie Hood

Building on the rich NIEHS legacy of research and initiatives addressing the environmental component of health disparities, more than 230 participants gathered July 29-31 for the [Environmental Health Disparities and Environmental Justice Meeting](#) at NIEHS in Research Triangle Park, N.C.

The event brought together grantees, community partners, health care professionals, and government representatives from federal and state agencies, along with potential new partners in research. The meeting was an ideal setting to share, listen, and promote best practices of current and past environmental health disparities and environmental justice research, while also focusing on emerging issues and new directions in the field (see [meeting booklet](#)

(<http://www.niehs.nih.gov/news/newsletter/2013/9/spotlight-partners/file474613.pdf>) (2MB) for the agenda, abstracts, and additional resources).

Representatives from several federal agencies organized the meeting, including NIEHS, spearheaded by [NIEHS Partnerships for Environmental Public Health](#) leads Program Analyst Liam O'Fallon and Health Scientist Administrator Symma Finn, Ph.D., who worked collaboratively with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD); the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health and Indian Health Service.

"We envisioned the meeting as an opportunity to facilitate and strengthen ties among federal partners, and to create connections among the grantees supported by those different agencies," said O'Fallon.

Building on a foundation of synergy

With such a diverse group of participants and a wide-ranging agenda, the meeting achieved a critical mass of enthusiasm and commitment to advancing work on health disparities, as NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D., observed in her opening remarks.

"By working together, we can make the whole much more than the sum of the parts, by conducting research looking not only at the totality of exposures that people endure, but also factoring in new exposures and looking at issues of communication and capacity-building," she said. "With the commitment to community engagement, dialogue, and capacity-building of all partners, we can have lasting impacts and improved public health."

Noting that there is a growing body of evidence pointing to the significant influence of non-

Twin themes shape historic meeting

A deep-seated commitment to civil rights informs the pillars of justice and parity in environmental public health community-based participatory research.

- **Environmental Health Disparities (EHD)**

EHD programs address the unique contribution of the environment to health disparities, which are preventable differences in the burden of disease, injury, violence, or opportunities to achieve optimal health that are experienced by socially disadvantaged populations.

- **Environmental Justice (EJ)**

EJ initiatives promote the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.

biological factors, such as social and environmental determinants, NIMHD Director John Ruffin, Ph.D., expressed similar sentiments in his welcoming remarks. "Bringing together such a diverse group of partners and interested collaborators suggests that you recognize the importance of integrating distinct and sometimes fragmented disciplines," he said. "That has been our mantra at NIMHD, because we realize that it will take more than NIMHD and more than NIH to address health disparities."

Dovetailing with the strategic plan

As Finn explained, the meeting was designed to promote the implementation of the NIEHS [strategic plan](#) goals, particularly goal 6, which focuses on establishing a research agenda related to environmental health disparities, and goal 11, which promotes communication and collaboration among researchers and stakeholders in environmental health sciences. But, with its emphasis on collaborations, partnerships, and integration, there was more to the meeting than simply presentations on the issues, she explained.

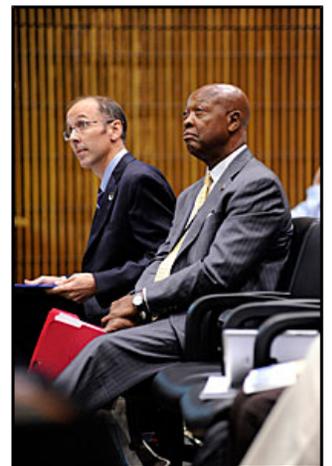
"We framed a lot of the sessions in terms of NIEHS strategic goals, but it was a little more open-ended," Finn told the participants. "Sometimes we tend to put things into categories and then try to fit people's needs and concerns into those categories, but this was more about asking what's out there in the community and how we can actually use research to address health disparities."

The meeting's format enhanced the empowerment of the community members and partners (see related [story](#)), with three sets of concurrent sessions and an extensive report-back session in which participants in the twelve breakout groups developed concrete recommendations - to-do lists that will help set the tone and course for measurable progress.

(Ernie Hood is a contract writer with the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



Birnbaum shared her impression of the meeting. "[This will be] an opportunity for us to build upon our collective work, strengthen our partnerships, identify the historical issues that require our attention, note emerging issues, and prioritize next steps, and to move forward not only as big groups but as individuals, to ensure that environmental injustice and disparities eventually become things of the past." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



O'Fallon, left, and Ruffin listened to Birnbaum's presentation. Ruffin, who spoke next, described the long-standing partnership between NIMHD and NIEHS, as the institutes have worked together for many years to pioneer research on environmental health disparities and programs on environmental justice. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



National Center for Environmental Research Director James Johnson Jr., Ph.D., welcomed meeting attendees on behalf of the EPA, one of the conference's organizing bodies. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Finn, left, took advantage of a break to talk with grantee Chensheng (Alex) Lu, Ph.D., of Harvard University, about his project on children's exposure to pesticides in produce. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Keynote speaker Marie Lynn Miranda, Ph.D., dean of the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan, formerly of Duke University, set the tone for the meeting with her keynote address, "It Takes a Village: Integrated Methods for Addressing Environmental Health Disparities." (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



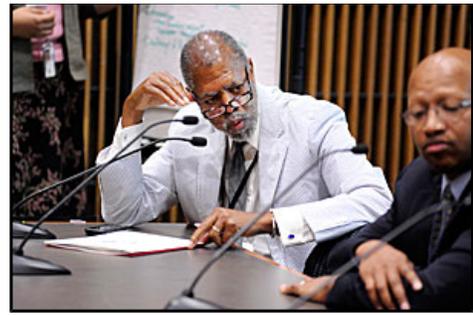
Silent Spring Institute Executive Director Julia Brody, Ph.D., awaited the opportunity to join the discussion during one of the meeting's general sessions. Brody is an NIEHS grantee and member of the [National Advisory Environmental Health Sciences Council](#). (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



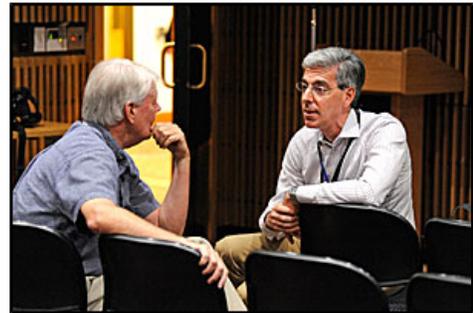
Joan Pakenham, Ph.D., director of the NIEHS Office of Human Research Compliance, co-moderated the session on Institutional Review Boards and Community Engaged Research: How Can Universities and Community Organizations Work Together to Strengthen the Ethics Review of Community Based Research? (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



University of Arizona (UA) graduate student Melissa Valdez described NIEHS-funded research on environmental literacy that she and Marti Lindsey, Ph.D., director of the UA Community Outreach and Education Program, conducted in collaboration with researchers from the University of Rochester. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



Former NIEHS and NTP Director Kenneth Olden, Ph.D., who is now director of the EPA National Center for Environmental Assessment, returned to the NIEHS campus to moderate one of the concurrent sessions devoted to using geographic and spatial analysis to help examine environmental determinants of health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)



The breaks gave participants a chance to continue their dialogue, including NIEHS representatives Chip Hughes, left, director of the Worker Education and Training Program, and John Balbus, M.D., senior advisor for public health. (Photo courtesy of Steve McCaw)

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