

Centers focus on emerging environmental health science and collaboration

By Joe Balintfy

Directors and staff from across the country found fresh perspectives on emerging environmental health sciences at the 2014 NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences [Core Centers](#) annual meeting, hosted by the University of Southern California (USC) April 7-9 in Los Angeles.

Presentations on environmental contributions to obesity and the effects of environmental agents on the brain anchored the agenda. With a Disaster Research Response Tabletop Exercise (see [story](#)) beforehand, and a community forum on public health, smart growth, and land use planning afterwards (see sidebar), the meeting provided center directors with diverse experiences and new expertise, to enrich the programs they oversee.

"There were cutting edge science and new opportunities for collaboration and multidisciplinary research, not just in the talks, but also through the interaction of the groups," said meeting host, Frank Gilliland, M.D., Ph.D., director of the Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center and professor of preventive medicine at the USC Keck School of Medicine.

Scientific partnerships foster cutting-edge research

NIEHS Environmental Health Sciences Core Centers tackle problems such as identifying toxic substances in the environment and learning how they affect people's health. Centers approach these key issues with a variety of methods.

"We're a very diverse group of centers," said Joe Beckman, Ph.D., the center director at Oregon State University. He said it was important for the directors to meet together to build understanding of the range of scientific challenges across the country. "And it's important to find out what's happening at NIEHS." That perspective was shared by NIEHS staff as well as NIEHS and NTP Director Linda Birnbaum, Ph.D.

"These core centers are adept at building partnerships," said Birnbaum, pointing out that the centers can continue working together through supplement funding, which encourages cross-center collaborations, working groups, and using online meeting tools. "In this electronic age, there are more ways that we can get together - and work well together - such as webinars."

"Grease our neurons"

The meeting included scientific presentations, administrative meetings, and Community Outreach and Engagement Core (COEC) sessions.

"These activities grease our neurons so we can start thinking about how we can adapt our science and engineering to address the problems the community perceives," explained John Essigmann, Ph.D., professor of biological engineering and chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), and director of the MIT Center for Environmental Health Sciences. He called the scientific sessions excellent. "They were very accessible, to the point where I could relate what was being presented to other branches in environmental health sciences," Essigmann said.

Collaboration through communication

COECs build and sustain multi-directional bridges between the centers and their communities, both scientific and public, to identify and address environmental health concerns. Attendees shared various tools being used to measure environmental exposures, including UV dosimeters and passive wristbands, to answer questions community residents have about exposures, as well as to educate students about environmental exposures and health. Sessions included discussions on using social media to boost COEC and center goals, by developing communication strategies that include blogs, science cafes, and videos.

"I think these center meetings have evolved to really provide a lot of opportunities for the kind of communication that is so critical for advancing science," Gilliland concluded.

(Joe Balintfy is a public affairs specialist in the NIEHS Office of Communications and Public Liaison.)



Kafi Blumenfield, who serves on the Recreation and Parks Commission for the City of Los Angeles, gave one of the community forum presentations. (Photo courtesy of Amanda Shaffer)

Community forum unites public health, smart growth, and land use planning

Deciding where to put a park or create access to walking and cycling in a big city is not easy. The best intentions, such as building housing near mass transit stops and creating urban gardens, may have unintended consequences, including increased exposure to traffic pollution and food grown in soil that may be contaminated. To help find solutions, scientists, urban planners, and community groups met for a community forum, hosted by NIEHS, the Southern California Environmental Health Sciences Center, and the USC-Children's Environmental Health Center.

"As we learn more about how the environment influences our health, it is very important to connect communities like this," said Birnbaum. "In the research community, we want to hear what's happening related to local planning and public health."

The forum included short presentations and a poster session where representatives from 17 local community groups (http://hydra.usc.edu/scehsc/community_forum_poster_links_2014.pdf) described their work - and the challenges they face - to center scientists, NIEHS staff, and other participants.

"The poster session was a high point," said Gilliland. "I think the community forum was innovative in that it allowed the researchers and policymakers to interact free form with community group leaders, with lots of great opportunities for learning and exchanging ideas."

"It was wonderful to have such a cross-sector discussion on the impact of land use and urban planning on public health," said Scott Chan, program director for the Asian and Pacific Islander Obesity Prevention Alliance, one of the community groups displaying a poster.

This community forum was the latest in a [series](#). "Each community forum is different because ideas percolate from local stakeholders," said John Schelp, NIEHS special assistant for community engagement and outreach. "In this one we took a 45-minute break to look at displays from community groups, and everyone came back to the following session. So folks were truly engaged."



Alina Bokde of the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust described her group's work to create small parks and gardens, to help remedy the critical lack of green space in the city's underserved neighborhoods. (Photo courtesy of Amanda Shaffer)



Jose Hernandez of the East LA Community Corporation explained his group's work to build affordable housing and engage in community planning. (Photo courtesy of Amanda Shaffer)

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