

**CRISIS WITH NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASE
IN THE UNITED STATES AFFILIATED PACIFIC ISLANDS**
HHS Paper for March 2011, IGIA Senior Plenary Session

ISSUE

In May 2010, the Pacific Island Health Officers Association (PIHOA) issued a regional state of health emergency declaration (hereinafter, Declaration) regarding non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the United States affiliated Pacific islands (USAPI). The Declaration addressed statistics and risk factors for NCDs including obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes, depression, injury, arthritis and gout.

BACKGROUND

As described in the Declaration, rates of NCDs and their risk factors in the USAPI are among the highest in the world, are rapidly increasing, are epidemic, and include high tobacco use, high alcohol consumption, obesity, significant environmental and behavioral health barriers to healthy eating and healthy families, a propensity toward injury, and a high prevalence of sedentary lifestyles. The NCD burden in the USAPI is expected to worsen significantly over the next generation due to the comparatively large percentage of youth in the USAPI population and the chronic outmigration of essential skills needed for effective health care.

From an economic standpoint, local, national and international funding for programs to lessen the impact of NCDs has not met the need. The annual health care budgets for the USAPI are a tiny fraction of the U.S. per capita health care expenditure and cannot sustain or manage the costs of an epidemic of NCDs. USAPI medical systems are unable to manage the health complications of NCDs effectively due to the high cost and infrastructure required for end stage treatment that can include dialysis; cancer surgery, chemotherapy and radiation therapy; intensive cardiac care, specialty stroke units, and sub-specialty medical care.

Residents of one USAPI jurisdiction have often migrated to other parts of the USAPI and to the United States for medical care that cannot be accessed locally. This medical migration stresses already burdened health systems in Guam, the CNMI and the United States and causes suffering among USAPI families and communities due to separation and financial strain.

The current approach to NCD prevention and control in the USAPI faces numerous challenges, including the limitations of disease-specific donor funding, poor or absent public health planning, insufficient NCD data, ineffective systems of evaluation and quality assurance, weak lab infrastructure, a largely undertrained, underskilled, and poorly-incentivized workforce, poor coordination

and communication, and a misalignment between local priorities and donor funding.

STATUS

The declaration states PIHOA's intention to develop a clear regional policy on NCDs to consist of high level goals and recommendations that will provide voluntary and flexible guidance to PIHOA members states, donor agencies and regional partners on addressing the epidemic of NCDs. The President of PIHOA is expected to propose a pan-Pacific state of health emergency declaration for NCDs at the June 2011 WHO meeting of Pacific health ministers in the Solomon Islands.

The Declaration also exhorts local, national and international agencies and donors to devote the same or greater urgency and resource mobilization to the cause of and response to NCDs in the USAPI as they have more recently devoted to pandemic influenza and bioterrorism concerns.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has a number of program agencies working with USAPI health departments for many years to encourage health promotion and disease prevention via the advocacy of healthy lifestyles and behaviors including enhanced diet and nutrition, physical activity programs and behavioral risk reduction. While much remains to be accomplished in the way of public health infrastructure development, these health promotion programs and others from Federal entities such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture have provided needed support to USAPI health departments as these jurisdictions develop effective strategies to deal with the constantly increasing rate of NCDs. Federal agencies must work in partnership with PIHOA, its member states, regional health organizations and coalitions, and each other to fine tune their technical assistance and funding support in ways that more effectively address the NCD emergency in the USAPI.