



# Addressing and Overcoming Health Inequities: The Challenge in Urban America

By Michelle Taylor

Former Surgeon General, Dr. David Satcher issued a challenge to all those present at the Urban Health Institute's (UHI) quarterly symposium on January 27, 2010. He declared that leaders were needed to transform the health and wellness of our communities and invited everyone to join the "relay race" to tackle the public health issues of our time. As the director of the Satcher Health Leadership Institute at Morehouse School of Medicine in Atlanta, he has committed himself to the reduction and eventual elimination of health disparities in this country and around the world, and he brought his message to the Baltimore community.

Dr. Satcher outlined several focus areas to begin the work of eliminating disparities in health, including access to care, improvement in the quality of care, lifestyle enhancement, improvement of environmental quality, and a balanced research agenda. He reminded the Johns Hopkins family that "culture counts" and asked everyone to take a "CRASH" course in making a difference by considering the following tenets: Consider culture, Respect, Assess and Affirm, Sensitivity and Self-awareness, and Humility.

Dr. Satcher served as U.S. Surgeon General from 1998 to 2002, and since that time he has continued to work to eradicate health disparities in the U.S. In 2006, he established the Satcher Health Leadership Institute (SHLI) within the National Center for Primary Care at Morehouse School of Medicine. The mission of the SHLI is to "develop a diverse group of public health leaders, foster and support leadership strategies, and influence policies and practices toward the reduction and ultimate elimination of disparities in health."

With this core mission and a specific focus on mental health, sexual health, and family health, the SHLI is a continuation of Dr. Satcher's commitment to the elimination of health disparities and the development of effective public health practices and interventions. A recipient of many distinguished honors and honorary degrees for his work, Dr. Satcher continues to be a preeminent

*"We're in this together. It's not an 'us' and it's not a 'them.' This problem of health disparities and health inequities affects all of us and it really affects us equally...because sooner or later all of us will be victims of health disparities and health inequities, because our entire community must be healthy if any of us are going to advance to where we think we should be."*

—Rev. Dr. Francis "Toni" Draper  
Pastor, Freedom Temple AME Zion Church

*"(We need) a paradigm shift to understand that low income, working poor, fragile middle class African Americans and Latinos need to be viewed as part of the solution and not the problem. They also need to be viewed as assets for the region's growth and assets in terms of the economic development of this city and of this region."*

— Diane Bell McCoy  
President and CEO, Associated Black Charities

voice in the fight against health disparities.

His message is timely given some of Baltimore's disparity statistics:

- The life expectancy at birth for an African American baby born between 2006 and 2008 was 70.2 years, compared to 76.2 years for a white baby born during the same time period.
- In 2006, there were 175 new HIV cases per 100,000 people among African Americans, compared to 23.2 new cases per 100,000 people, nationally.
- African Americans were twice as likely to die from diabetes-related causes as whites (44.5 vs. 23.8 per 100,000 people, respectively).

After a full day meeting with university officials, Baltimore community members, and students, Dr. Satcher's visit culminated in a rallying cry to strive for health equity through eliminating "inequities at a social level" and working toward a balanced community approach that includes health promotion, disease prevention, early detection, and moves toward universal health care.

A panel discussion after Dr. Satcher's presentation featuring panelists Diane Bell McCoy, President and CEO of Associated Black Charities, Francis "Toni" Draper, Pastor of Freedom Temple AME Zion Church, and Dean Michael Klag, Dean of the Bloomberg School of Public Health, continued the conversation and echoed Dr. Satcher's sentiments.