

HEALTH REFORM: WHY ISN'T THE UNITED STATES THE HEALTHIEST NATION?

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) believes that the United States should become the healthiest nation in the world. We envision a 21st century United States health system that results in optimal health for all. Such a system will prioritize prevention, provide health care for every person, eliminate inequities in health status, and protect people and communities from emerging health threats.

As Congress prepares to tackle the challenge of providing health care coverage for the uninsured and reforming the American health care system, NACCHO believes that the health status of all Americans must not be left out of the equation. The United States is one of the least healthy developed nations in the world. Our country ranks 44th in the world in life expectancy and 41st in the world in infant mortality. The United States spends more money on health care, about 16% of our Gross Domestic Product, than any other country, but we get much less for our money in health outcomes. Poor health outcomes in the United States are strongly associated with race and social class, but those factors are not the sole reasons for our dismal global standing. These stark facts alone are sufficient justification to rethink and rework how we approach medical and health care.

A transformed U.S. health system will measure and improve outcomes continuously. It will be accountable and transparent to the public. It will benefit from a standardized, integrated health information system, a workforce that is trained to respond to the public's health needs, and flexible, sustainable financing for key health system capabilities.

It is imperative to begin now by establishing a shared vision and taking steps designed to create a system that ultimately will result in optimal health for all persons in the United States. The first steps should include:

- 1) Responding to the public need and demand for universal access to comprehensive health care coverage. Such coverage should emphasize prevention and assist individuals in using existing health services and systems effectively;
- 2) Building the national commitment to prevention through enhanced support for individual and community-based interventions known to promote healthy behavior, create healthy environments, and/or reduce the incidence of chronic and infectious diseases;
- 3) Promoting collaboration between providers of medical care, the public health system, and their partners in the private and public sectors to create healthier communities and eliminate health inequities.

These steps will begin to address the needed changes to produce an integrated health system that works to improve the health of all Americans, emphasizing prevention of disease and health promotion as well as responding to acute medical events.

