

NIEHS Leads Research Efforts Addressing Domestic Health Disparities

The NIEHS has emerged with a significant leadership role in the health disparities arena and has undertaken a number of activities to help eliminate health disparities influenced by the social and physical milieu. These activities include the announcement of the multiagency Request for Application (RFA) ES-00-004, "Health Disparities: Linking Biological and Behavioral Mechanisms with Social and Physical Environments," located online at <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-ES-00-004.html>. Moreover, NIEHS director Kenneth Olden cochaired a director-level trans-NIH working group that has set research priorities directing the development of NIH initiatives on domestic health disparities beginning in FY 2001.

The disparity in health between socioeconomically disadvantaged citizens and those who are better off has existed for centuries and continues to this day. These health disparities may be defined as differences in disease incidence, morbidity, and mortality that exist between specific populations. Disparities are most apparent in and closely associated with populations with varying levels of socioeconomic status. The most striking health disparities involve shorter life expectancy and higher rates of cancer, birth defects, infant mortality, asthma, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.

Although health care access may account for some of this disparity, the differences in environmental and occupational exposures may also play a role. Exposure to toxic environmental agents can have different effects depending on a person's age, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, sex, and genetic composition. Some subsets of the population are inherently more susceptible to cellular and genetic damage for a number of reasons, including genetic makeup, nutritional status, or in the case of children, the vulnerability of developing systems to environmental insult. Any or all of these factors may contribute to the health disparities observed in socioeconomically disadvantaged and underserved populations.

RFA ES-00-004 is the first of several multiagency grant solicitations from the NIH. Awards are anticipated in FY 2000. The program contact for this RFA is Frederick L. Tyson, e-mail: tyson2@niehs.nih.gov.