

New center tackles health disparities in Boston

February 5, 2008 — The University of Massachusetts Boston and the Harvard School of Public Health will create a research center devoted to health and healthcare disparities.

A five-year, \$7.4 million grant from the National Institutes of Health's National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities will fund the HORIZON Center, named for its goal of providing healthy options, research, interventions, and community organizing, the schools said. The center will work with the Cherishing our Hearts and Souls Coalition, a group in Roxbury, which has the youngest, poorest, least educated, and least employed people among Boston's neighborhoods.

Boston's racial and ethnic groups have different risks of illnesses and death. Black residents, for example, have higher rates of preterm births, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, hospitalization, cancer mortality, and premature death, according to the Boston Public Health Commission.

HORIZON pioneers a new way to discover and implement promising solutions to address this unequal burden of poor health, called community-based participatory research. This is a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. If research is to result in findings that are practical and culturally appropriate, the researcher and the researched community must work together. Community-based participatory research also goes beyond linking health to medical care, lifestyles, and genes to consider other powerful determinants of health, specifically the social conditions in which we are born, live and work.

Of the billions of dollars spent on healthcare research in the U.S., only an estimated \$45 million is allocated to community-based participatory research, but that amount is growing. The call to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities is one of the key drivers. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has organized a [national partnership](#) to end health disparities. [Unnatural Causes](#), a groundbreaking documentary series on public television, exploring America's racial and socioeconomic inequities in health, has furthered this call to action.

Many leaders of community-based public health groups have stories of disappointment and missed opportunities, experiences that foster an unhealthy skepticism about whether academia can be a trustworthy partner. The world of biomedical science can seem far away when you are dealing with immediate problems such as poverty, racism, and environmental conditions.

"But it's a total myth that underserved communities have no interest in research," Dr. Claudia Baquet, director of the University of Maryland Comprehensive Cancer Center for Health Disparities, said. "It's just that it has not been presented in a way that they can consider the benefits. Trust is the issue." Baquet spoke at a conference earlier this year at UMass Boston also sponsored by the Harvard School of Public Health and community outreach organizations.

Celia Moore, professor and chairperson of the psychology department at UMass Boston, and leader of the HORIZON initiative notes, "We propose to increase the number of local agencies, community organizations and residents who contribute to and participate in research, training, health promotion, and community organizing activities, and focus them on the common goal of reducing the health disparities."

"We hope that what we learn and put into practice in our own community can eventually benefit urban residents across the nation," said James H. Ware, dean for academic affairs at Harvard School of Public Health."

The HORIZON Center's four core missions, as well as its research and pilot projects, are all designed to strengthen the evidence-based practices and strategies for understanding and training practitioners in reducing health disparities.