

Blacks urged to bridge inequities in health

By Hazel Trice Edney
Special to Sentinel-Voice

COLUMBUS, Ohio (NNPA) — Lisa Fager remembers her father as a big man, in both stature and in reputation. The 6-foot-3-inch, 250-pound, Casey Powell Jr., a Black man, owned businesses in Lancaster, Penn.

As big as he was, one of her most vivid memories of him was the day he cried as she rushed him to an emergency room in 1987, a year after he underwent a triple bypass heart surgery.

"He wasn't having chest pains. He says he just knew something was wrong. He was swelling and he just didn't feel right," recalls Fager. "I'd never seen my father cry."

The doctors were of little help.

"They said he had gas," she recalls. Then, they sent him home. Two days later, he died of heart failure at the age of 43, leaving behind a 17-year-old daughter, two sons, ages 10 and 3, and a 34-year-old widow.

Though her father died 18 years ago, Fager fought back tears as she recounted the story at a Town Hall meeting on health disparities at the National Conference of Black Mayors.

Did Fager's father die prematurely because, as has been recently documented, White doctors don't refer Black patients to specialists at the same rate they refer Whites?

These are life and death issues. Of the 15 top killers, African-Americans lead in 11 categories.

"As a Black American, I



Pictured from left to right are Ricardo Byrd, executive director of the National Association of Neighborhoods; American Legacy Foundation Executive Vice President Amber Hardy; Inglewood, Calif., Mayor Roosevelt Dorn, president-elect of the National Conference of Black Mayors; and U. S. Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss. Hardy and Thompson were honored for their work on behalf of tobacco cessation during a town hall meeting on African-American health issues at the National Conference of Black Mayors last week.

am concerned that the disparities in care and access to care are so pronounced that nearly a million deaths between 1991 and 2000 would not have occurred if African-Americans had received the same care as Whites," says Inglewood, Calif., Mayor Roosevelt F. Dorn, new president of the National Conference of Black Mayors, who leads the Black mayors' education campaign on tobacco-related diseases and other health disparities.

Health experts say there is legitimate reason for concern.

"At every level of income, Black folks die sooner than White folks," said Dr. Adewale Troutman, director of the Metro Louisville Health Department in Kentucky. "Economics is only a part of the answer, but we have to go back to this question of racism... Provider attitudes and internalized racism in the provider attitudes

is a part of the problem," he explained.

Troutman said every Black organization should have a health agenda to deal with racial disparities. He said there should also be a community coalition that monitors hospitals and report racial disparities in treatment and deaths. Hospitals that discriminate should lose Medicare and Medicaid funding, he said.

The disparities are striking, said town hall moderator George E. Curry, editor-in-chief of the National Newspaper Publishers Association News Service. Curry cited health disparity numbers published in last year's National Urban League's "State of Black of America" report.

David R. Williams, a senior research scientist at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, wrote in the report that Blacks had higher death rates

than Whites in 11 of the 15 leading causes of death in the United States. The diseases are heart disease, cancer, stroke, accidents, diabetes, flu and pneumonia, kidney diseases, septicemia, homicide, cirrhosis of the liver and hypertension.

With major improvements in the overall health of Americans over the past 50 years, racial disparities have either remained the same or widened, Williams reported.

The Town Hall meeting was a part of the mayors' agreement to help educate city leaders on tobacco cessation and the health of African-Americans overall.

The American Legacy Foundation, the nation's only foundation solely focused on tobacco prevention and cessation, last year awarded a \$4.5 million, three-year grant to a coalition of six national Black organizations. The group includes the National Newspaper Publishers Association

Foundation, the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, the National Conference of Black Mayors, and the National Association of Neighborhoods.

Amber Hardy, Legacy executive vice president, told the mayors that the root cause of many of the diseases killing Blacks can be traced back to tobacco.

"We often don't think seriously about tobacco use as a major culprit for a host of other killers, including heart disease, cancers, and stroke... And the number of our children suffering with asthma due to second-hand smoke is increasingly on the rise," Hardy said. "An epidemic is now here, and it's very evident by its toll on our collective health."

Hardy pointed out that approximately 45,000 African-Americans die from tobacco-related illnesses each year.

The Center for Disease Control has reported that if current smoking patterns of African-Americans continue, an estimated 1.6 million Black people currently under the age of 18 will become regular smokers and about 500,000 of them will eventually die of a smoking-related disease.

Fager, hired by the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation to educate college students on the dangers of tobacco, says part of the problem is just plain lack of knowledge. Therefore, she has worked to form coalitions of student organizations for creative ways to educate students about the dangers of tobacco.

"We have a lot of work to do," she says. "We still have students — I mean college-educated students — asking which ones are the safe cigarettes."

Renita Carter, National Urban League programs coordinator for youth development, agrees that coalition-building is the key.

She says the Urban

League will continue to educate the public on cigarette smoking and other health care issues, such as obesity, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS through the "State of Black America" report and by partnering with other caring organizations.

"We're about partnering with the NAACP and taking a stand with American Legacy because we believe in order to reach our community, we have to do it as community and as village," Carter says.

The decision by Black organizations to take on the fight against tobacco use and health disparities should not be downplayed, said Dorn.

"The fact that six major Black organizations are working together cooperating to reduce and prevent tobacco use is of tremendous significance. This level of cooperation and support is unprecedented since the civil rights movement in the 1960s," Dorn said.

The mayors conference held a separate seminar on "Getting the Smoke Out" during last week's conference in order to educate its members on tobacco cessation. It plans to educate the public through a media campaign aimed at collecting 100,000 written pledges from households promising not to allow smoking in the home and also by working with municipalities to form anti-tobacco programs with cash rewards.

Reversing the trend of the cultural habit will not be easy, said Sam Gresham, president of the Columbus Urban League.

Not only cultivating and farming tobacco, but chewing it, smoking it in pipes and using snuff were parts of socializing, Gresham said. "There's a big cool thing that's associated with smoking," he said.

Gresham declared. "I stopped smoking because of a woman. She said, 'I don't want it in my house any more. You can't come into

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Noose

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laughed."

At least one of the Black plaintiffs "...observed the White depot superintendent staring at the noose with a White coworker." Several other White coworkers later told investigators "they either never saw a rope hanging over Powell's workstation, or disagree with plaintiffs' description of the rope as a noose."

It was shortly after discovering the noose that one of the plaintiffs contacted Ed Smith, the director of the Civil Rights Division of the North Carolina Office of Administrative Hearings, about the incident.

A complaint that the

Blacks were subjected to a racially hostile and harassing working environment...in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964...and in violation of sections of the North Carolina General Statutes, and all other applicable state laws, due to the presence of the noose" was typed up and submitted.

The fact that the initial complaint was filed at OAH-CRD is important because NCDOT attorneys tried to have the case dismissed, alleging that the plaintiffs should have filed first with a purely state agency, like the State Personnel Commission.

Judge Britt didn't buy that argument, stating that it

didn't make a difference legally, and that there were significant federal issues involved.

Judge Britt's court order and findings of fact means that, given a jury trial, that there is enough solid evidence to put before a jury.

Key to the case are the interviews conducted by agents for the State Bureau of Investigation that elicited admissions from the White employee that he did hang the noose to intimidate Blacks.

That employee, Raymond Powell, also, according to court documents, at one time said, "We [White people] need to go back to the way things used to be. Fight 'em

and hang 'em like my father did."

Parts of the bureau's report will be allowed into evidence. Two minor claims made by the plaintiffs were dismissed by Judge Britt. A motion to allow the entire interview and an affidavit from the bureau's investigating agent is still pending and will be decided before jury selection.

Al McSurely, attorney for the seven NCDOT plaintiffs, told *The Wilmington Journal* that he and his clients, after three long years, are ready for trial to begin on May 9.

It is expected to last a week.

Cash Michaels writes for *The Wilmington Journal*.



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