

April 1, 2011

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius
Secretary of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue SE
Washington DC

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

On behalf of the coalition of undersigned advocates for environmental public health, we are writing to express our extreme concern about the devastating cuts to CDC's environmental public health programs in the President's FY12 Budget. The President's budget proposes to consolidate and reduce by 51% the funding for CDC's Healthy Homes/Lead Poisoning Prevention and the National Asthma Control Programs. Without a doubt, this is the smallest budget for these programs since their inception. These programs have demonstrated cost-effectiveness, are critical to reducing health disparities, and help strengthen environmental public health. More specifically:

- We strongly oppose the funding cuts to the CDC's Healthy Homes/Lead Poisoning Prevention and the National Asthma Control Programs. The cuts are not reducing the federal deficit, rather they are diverting funds to other programs at a time when critical public health programs and jobs are needed to protect families from asthma and lead.
- We disagree with the proposed approach to consolidating the above programs as it will reduce their effectiveness and result in a significant cut in services, particularly impacting high-risk families and individuals. Such a radical plan should not be executed under the pressure of the appropriations process. Furthermore, since CDC retains less than 25% of the funds to manage these two programs, the 51% cut will be passed directly to states and localities, and ultimately to their clients.
- Medicaid should pay for many of the services that are provided by the lead and asthma programs, including targeted case management, asthma self management education, home interventions to control an individual's asthma, and comprehensive follow-up for children with lead poisoning. However, these services, particularly for asthma, are almost never properly covered. HHS has the opportunity to rectify this situation by ensuring that full coverage of these services is part of all State Medicaid Plans.

We understand the need for improved efficiency and fiscal restraint. However, with these cuts, the federal government will squander important gains in environmental public health.

Short-sighted cuts will result in significant long-term costs

Any near-term savings within CDC will be eclipsed by significant long-term costs to our health care and educational systems, and to our overall economy. For every \$1 spent to reduce lead hazards there is a benefit of \$17-220.ⁱ CDC's lead poisoning prevention and healthy homes efforts prevent approximately 100,000 children from being lead poisoned each year. Similarly, for every \$1 spent on asthma interventions there is a benefit of \$36.ⁱⁱ From 2000 to 2007, the 34 states and 2 territories that received funding from the National Asthma Control Program realized a 10% decline in the rate of asthma-related hospitalizations.ⁱⁱⁱ Proper asthma management has the potential to save at least 25% of total asthma costs—or close to \$5 billion nation-wide annually.^{iv}

Communities of color and low-income families will be disproportionately burdened

The impact of the proposed cuts will fall squarely on the backs of low-income families and communities of color who are disproportionately impacted by environmental health hazards. Over 2 million African-American children have asthma—this is 18% of all black children (compared with 7% for white children).

^vAfrican-American children are two times more likely to be hospitalized for asthma and are four times more

likely to die from asthma compared to white children.^{vi} African-American children ages one to five are nearly three times as likely to be lead poisoned as their white peers.^{vii}

Environmental public health work force will be dealt a significant blow

The proposed cuts exacerbate an already dire need to revitalize the environmental public health workforce. Since 2008, roughly 19% of the nationwide local health department workforce has been eliminated, and 87% of all state and territorial health agencies have and continue to experience job losses. About 6,000 local health department jobs were eliminated last year, for a total of 29,000 since 2008; meanwhile, 18,000 local health department employees had reduced hours or mandatory furloughs.^{viii} At the same time, over 15,250 state jobs have been lost in central, local, and regional offices, and a third of all health agencies required employees to take furlough days in FY10.^{ix}

Impacts on Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Services

CDC's Healthy Homes/Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program funds state and local health departments to screen children for elevated blood lead levels, to ensure that lead-poisoned infants and children receive medical and environmental follow-up, and to support prevention of lead poisoning and other housing-related illnesses. After sustaining 50% cuts in FY11, grantees could be put out of business by the proposed FY12 budget. Expected results of the FY12 cut include the following:

- CDC will reduce the number of grant recipients from 40 to 34.
- Grants to Detroit, Chicago, NYC, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia will likely be eliminated, siphoning off \$5 million to create a huge gap in services in places with the highest need.
- Blood lead testing rates will decrease, as will referral for follow-up care such as nutritional and environmental interventions.
- Local data collection will be rare and random. Federal, state, and local agencies depend on surveillance data to define hotspots of need and inform plans for lead poisoning prevention programs at every level. CDC relied on these data when it discovered lead poisoning among newly arriving refugees and international adoptees, and helped remove leaded ayurvedic medicines and unsafe chelation agents from the market.^x
- CDC will be unable to identify new sources of lead, new risk factors, or options for treating lead poisoning in a timely way.
- Fewer homes will be inspected and cited for lead-paint hazards. **Enforcing lead laws saves more than \$45,000 per address made lead safe.**^{xi}

Impacts on Services Provided by the National Asthma Control Program

CDC's National Asthma Control Program helps people control their asthma, keeps them out of the hospital, and helps them lead healthier, more productive lives. The cuts will severely hamper workforce and professional development, self-management education, clinical quality improvements, and efforts to reduce environmental exposures and improve asthma management in schools, childcare centers and workplaces (in addition to homes). Specifically:

- The number of funded asthma control programs will drop from 36 to 15 or fewer.
- A projected **225 public health jobs will be lost.**
- CDC will be unable to collect critical data on asthma rates, services asthma patients receive, and information about how doctors treat asthma.
- The loss of comprehensive, successful asthma control programs may disrupt program successes to date.

Our Recommendations

We recommend that HHS re-examine its priorities and fully fund these critical cost-effective programs at the FY 2010 levels. We further recommend that HHS reconsider this program consolidation in consultation with

the programs' stakeholders. Finally, we recommend that HHS ensure full Medicaid reimbursement for the follow-up care of a child with lead poisoning, including an environmental investigation, as recommended by CDC.^{xii} Likewise, HHS should ensure that State Medicaid Plans universally cover appropriate, cost-effective, quality care for asthma as defined by the National Heart, Blood, and Lung Institute Guidelines.^{xiii} Self-management education, and home-based education and environmental management of asthma, offered by a range of qualified providers, should be fully reimbursable.

We would be pleased to meet with you or your staff to discuss our concerns and strategies for addressing them. For further information, please contact Rebecca Morley, Executive Director, National Center for Healthy Housing 443.539.4159 or Charlotte Collins, JD, Vice President of Policy and Programs, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, 202.974.1228.

Sincerely,

Charlotte Collins, JD
Vice President of Policy and
Programs
Asthma and Allergy
Foundation of America

Stacey Chacker
Director of Environmental
Health and Asthma Regional
Council of New England
Health Resources in Action

Rebecca Morley
Executive Director, National
Center for Healthy Housing
Chair, National Safe and
Healthy Housing Coalition

National Organizations

American Association of Radon Scientists and Technologists
American Association for Respiratory Care
American Society of Home Inspectors
Asthma Allergy Foundation of America
Breast Cancer Fund
Children's Health Forum
CLEARCorps USA
Coalition to End Childhood Lead Poisoning
Healthy Schools Network
Lead and Environmental Health Association
National Association for State Community Services Programs
National Center for Healthy Housing
National Environmental Health Association
National Latino Tobacco Control Network
National Physicians Alliance
National Association of Lead and Healthy Homes Grantees
Public Health Law & Policy
Physicians for Social Responsibility
Rebuilding Together
US Green Building Council

Local and State Organizations and Individual Practitioners

Donna Shanklin, Cullman, AL
Allergy Asthma & Immunology Society of Alaska, Anchorage, AK
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, Alaska Chapter, AK
Prevention Institute, Oakland, CA
Physicians for Social Responsibility, Los Angeles, CA
Public Health Institute, Oakland, CA

Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), Los Angeles, CA
Regional Asthma Management and Prevention, Oakland, CA
Get the Lead Out Coalition, a San Francisco Bay Area Coalition, Oakland, CA
L.A. Community Legal Center and Educational, Huntington Park, CA
UCLA Labor Occupational Safety and Health Program, Los Angeles, CA
KIWA Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance, Los Angeles, CA
Local Government Commission, Sacramento, CA
Coalition for Economic Survival, Los Angeles CA
Healthy Homes Collaborative, Los Angeles CA
Jimmy H. Hara, MD, FAAFP Los Angeles, CA
Rishi Manchanda MD MPH, Director of Social Medicine and Health Equity, St. John's Well Child and Family Centers, Los Angeles, CA
Michael McCormick, MD, Grass Valley, CA
Linda Ramirez, Los Angeles County, Environmental Health, Lead Programs, Commerce, CA
Daisy Chavez, Paralegal, Inner City Law Center, Los Angeles, CA
Serena Chen, Policy Advocacy Director, Bay Area Smoke-free Housing Project, Oakland, CA
Janet Scull, MPH, Coordinator, Asthma Coalition of Los Angeles County, CA
John Ngai, Los Angeles, CA
Montserrat Bernardino, Los Angeles, CA
Larry Hughes, San Pablo, CA
Renee Meyer, Environmental Scientist, Pinole CA
Jessica Cowley, Los Angeles, CA
Allison Mannos, Los Angeles, CA
Vy Nguyen, Los Angeles, CA
Giulia Pasciuto, Coordinator Food Access and Transportation, Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA
Ernest Roberts, Executive Director. PVJOBS, Los Angeles, CA
Joann Lo, Glendale, CA
Raul Anorve, Los Angeles, CA
Joel Moskowitz, Oakland, CA
Lina Stepick, Los Angeles, CA
Giulia Pasciuto, Coordinator Food Access and Transportation, Urban and Environmental Policy Institute, Occidental College, Los Angeles, CA
Sandra Habr-Valle, Los Angeles, CA
Alan Richards, Mentor Coordinator/Counselor, Amity Foundation, Los Angeles, CA
Evelyn Stern, Los Angeles, CA
Karen Griego-West, Member, CA Health & Housing Coalition, Long Beach, CA
Maurice L. Pantoja, Chief Environmental Health Specialist, Los Angeles County Dept of Public Health, Artesia, CA
Kathleen Ouchi, Public Health Nurse, Torrance, CA
Diana M. Shinn, Registered Environmental Health Specialist, Mono County Health Department (formerly with City of Long Beach Healthy Homes Program 2004 - 2008), Mammoth Lakes, CA
Ariana Jostad-Laswell, Berkeley, CA
Frank Hill, North Hollywood, CA
Daniel Carrillo, Los Angeles, CA
Eduardo Torres, Los Angeles, CA
Sheila Goldner, North Hollywood, CA
Julia Rubiner, Sunland, CA
Jewel DeRoy, Los Angeles, CA
Alan Johanns, Lead Safety and Healthy Homes Program Manager, San Diego, CA
Elizabeth Rayfield, Long Beach, CA

Jill Remelski, Los Angeles, CA
Cindy Liverance, Vice President of Programs, American Lung Association in Colorado
Michael V. Van Dyke, Ph.D., CIH, Assistant Professor, National Jewish Health, Denver, CO
Torrington Area Health District Torrington, CT
Connecticut Children's Medical Center, LAMPP Project Hartford, CT
CT Coalition for Environmental Justice, Hartford, CT
New England Society of Allergy, Norwalk, CT
Central CT Health District, Wethersfield, CT
Connecticut Allergy Society, Waterbury, CT
Rita Kornblum, City of Hartford Asthma Task Force, Hartford, CT
Laurel Baldwin-Ragaven MD, Asylum Hill Family Practice Center, Hartford, CT
Esther Figueroa, Hartford, CT
Marco Palmeri, Public Health Coordinator/Sanitarian/Housing Code Enforcement Official, Plainville Health Dept., Plainville, CT
Audrey M. Gaines, Lead Program Director, Bridgeport Health Department, Bridgeport, CT
Vivian Cross, Executive Director, Foundation for Educational Advancement, Inc., and Advisory Board Member for the CT Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities, Simsbury, CT
Neal B. Freuden, President, EnviroPlan LLC, West Hartford, CT
Chris Corcoran, Project Coordinator, CT Children's medical Center LAMPP Project Hartford, CT
Eunmi Han, Respiratory Therapist, AARC, Glastonbury, CT
Gloria A Jones, Bloomfield, CT
Cindy Barry, Groton, CT
Eileen O'Shea, DNP, RN, Assistant Professor, Fairfield University School of Nursing, Fairfield, CT
Louise LaChance, RN, Stamford, CT
Chris Randolph, MD, Center for Allergy, Waterbury, CT
Mary Buckley Davis, RRT, N-PS, AE-C, Oakdale, CT
Kathleen Cooper-McDermott, Asthma Educator-Certified, RN, New London County Asthma Action Partnership, Groton, CT
Breathe DC at the United Medical Center Foundation, Washington, DC
Parents for Nontoxic Alternatives, Washington, DC
Lead Safe DC, Washington, DC
Deborah Quint Shelef, MPH, AE-C, Project Director, Improving Pediatric Asthma Care in the District of Columbia (IMPACT DC), Center for Clinical and Community Research, Children's National Medical Center, Washington, DC
Elgloria Harrison, MS, RRT, NPS, AE-C, Chair Department of Nursing and Allied Health, University of the District of Columbia, Washington, DC
David E. Jacobs, PhD, CIH, Chair, Lead Poisoning Elimination and Healthy Homes Advisory Committee, Washington, DC
LaVerne Hawkins Jones, MPH, Epidemiologist, Washington, DC
Patricia Austin, RN, MSN, Director of Operations, HSC Home Care, LLC, Washington, DC
Professional Staffing Associates, Inc., Claymont, DE
Jamie Mack, Program Manager, Delaware Healthy Homes Program, Dover, DE
Stuart A Friedman MD, Delray Beach, FL
Barbara Turk, Instructor, Seagull Environmental, Ft Lauderdale, FL
Kathryn Blake, Pharm.D., Senior Research Scientist, Asthma & Allergy Research Program
Nemours Children's Clinic, FL
Carolyn Schaefer, Urbandale, IA
John M. Weiler, President, CompleWare Corporation, Iowa City, IA
Cynthia Stewart, NHS of Chicago, Chicago, IL
Vanessa Roanhorse, Chicago, IL

J. Edward Simpson, Data Systems Administrator, State of IL Dept of Public Health, Childhood Lead Program, Springfield, IL
Patrick M. MacRoy, Chicago IL
Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, IN
Dan Wilson, RRT, CPFT, AE-C, Pulmonary Practitioner, Indiana University Health Ambulatory Pulmonary Care Program, IN
DM Hadley, MD, Health Officer, Hendricks County, IN
Kathy Bowers, RCP, Asthma/COPD Center, American Health Network, IN
Debbie Koehl, MS, RRT, AE-C, Chair, Asthma Alliance of Indianapolis, IN
Joel J. Africk, President and Chief Executive Officer, Respiratory Health Association of Metropolitan Chicago, IL
Tammy Brinkman, RN, BSN, Public Health Nurse, Hendricks County Health Department, Hendricks County Asthma Coalition, IN
Robin Costley, CRT, Coalition Manager, Asthma Alliance of Indianapolis, Marion County Public Health Department, Asthma Educator, Indianapolis, IN
Dana Reed Wise, Chief, Bureau of Environmental Health, Marion County Health Department, Indianapolis, IN
Jane M. El-Dahr, M.D., Chief, Section of Pediatric Immunology, Allergy and Rheumatology, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
Vanessa Gueringer, New Orleans, LA
Howard W. Mielke, Ph.D., Research Professor, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA
Sipayik Environmental Dept, Pleasant Point, ME
Bangor Health & Community Services, Bangor, ME
Breathe Easy Coalition of Maine, Portland, ME
Piscataquis Public Health Council, Dover-Foxcroft, ME
Maine Health, Portland, ME
Joanna Fernald, RN, Certified Asthma Educator, Topsham, ME
Bonnie Irwin, Certified Asthma Educator, AE-C, Brewer, ME
Mary Ellen Johnston, School Health Coordinator, Greater Waterville Healthy Maine Partnership, Waterville, ME
Marvin Cling, Sr., Environmental Specialist, Pleasant Point, ME
Boston Public Health Commission, MA
Massachusetts Allergy and Asthma Society, MA
ASAP Environmental, Inc., Dorchester, MA
Suzanne Cashman, Newtonville, MA
Environmental Health Fund, Jamaica Plain, Boston, MA
Asthma Regional Council of New England, Dorchester MA
Health Resources in Action, Dorchester, MA
Greater Lawrence Family Health Center, Lawrence, MA
Dorchester Bay EDC, Dorchester, MA
Dorchester Environmental Health Coalition, Dorchester, MA
Bowdoin Street Health Center, Dorchester, MA
Allergy & Asthma Center of Massachusetts, Chestnut Hill, MA
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - New England Chapter
Greater Four Corners Action Coalition, Dorchester, MA
Pioneer Valley Asthma Coalition, Springfield, MA
Lead Action Collaborative, Dorchester, MA
Universal Community Voices Eliminating Disparities, Springfield, MA
Massachusetts Association for the Chemically Injured, Inc., Andover, MA
Cambridge Public Health Department, Cambridge, MA
Ecumenical Social Action Committee, Inc. (ESAC), Jamaica Plain, MA

Children's Hospital Boston Community Asthma Initiative, Boston, MA
Michele Abu Carrick, LICSW, MA
Paul R. Epstein, Associate Director, Center for Health and the Global Environment, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA
Sean Palfrey, MD, Medical Director, Boston Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Boston, MA
Mary Sliney, Goffstown, MA
Paul Geltman, MD, MPH, Pediatrician, Cambridge, MA
Eugene Barros, Healthy Homes Associate Director, Boston Public Health Commission, Boston, MA
Richard Rabin, Arlington, MA
Marvin Martin, Dorchester, MA
Victoria Reiersen, RN, AE-C, Acton, MA
Hilary Branch, MD, Springfield, MA
Anne M. Walton RN, AE-C, Clinical Coordinator, READY Study, Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA
Emily Suther, Pediatric Research Assistant, Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA
Ann Maggio, RN, Springfield MA Public Schools, Springfield, MA
Matthew Sadof, MD FAAP, Medical Home Chapter Champion on Asthma, Massachusetts Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics, Springfield , MA
Ann Ramsey, Administrative Manager, Boston University School of Medicine, Boston, MA
Michele Hart, Registered Nurse, Baystate Medical Center, Springfield, MA
Megan Sandel, MD, MPH, Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Boston University School of Medicine and Public Health Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA
Diem Le, BSN, RN, Dorchester, MA
Deborah Karan, Assistant Health Agent, Athol Board of Health, Athol, MA
Mary Gervasini, CCRP, Clinical Research Coordinator, Springfield, MA
David Turcotte, Sc.D., Research Professor, UMass Lowell, Lowell, MA
June Tourangeau, LPN/AE-C/RI Swansea, MA
Sandra Duran, Deputy Director, City of Boston, Boston, MA
Barbara Rice, Roslindale, MA
Alicia Morris, RN, Asthma Program Coordinator, Littleton, MA
Jill Kasper, MD, Somerville, MA
Nidhin Joseph, Masters in Public Health Student, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Amherst, MA
Betsy Rivera, Patient Access Rep., Public Health Nursing, Cambridge, MA
Lisa Dobberteen MD, Pediatrician, Cambridge Health Alliance, Cambridge , MA
Michael Ginieres, Environmental Health Officer, Cambridge Public Health Department, Cambridge, MA
Pauline, Staff RN, MNA, Somerville, MA
Kathryn Bonfiglio, RN, School Nurse, Cambridge, MA
Mary P. Saginario, RN, Nurse Administrator, Cambridge Pediatrics, Cambridge , MA
Elaine M. Wallace, Health Educator/Case Manager, ESAC Boston Asthma Initiative, Jamaica Plain, MA
Jewel T. Mendoza, RN, BSN, MSN, Cambridge Health Alliance, Cambridge, MA
Brenda L. Pizarro, Health Educator/ Case Manager, ESAC/ Boston Asthma Initiative, Jamaica Plain, MA
Michael L. Muilenberg, Senior Research Fellow, UMass School of Public Health, Amherst, MA
Mark Gillard, Boston, MA
Kate Kelly, Student Nurse Practitioner (at Yale), Holyoke, MA
Lindsay Schubiner, Harvard School of Public Health, Boston, MA
Jane McLeod, Program Director, OHHLHC Grant recipient, Lowell, MA
Thomas Plant, Jamaica Plain, MA
Douglas Desmarais, Lead Rehabilitation Specialist, Oak Hill CDC (NeighborWorks Chartered Member), Worcester MA
Ellen Tohn, Tohn Environmental Strategies, Wayland MA
Jean Zotter, Medford, MA

Elisabeth Fost Maring, Ph.D, Family Life Specialist, University of Maryland Extension, Department of Family Science, College Park, MD

Maia Banks-Scheetz, MS, CHES, President, Innovations in Health Promotion & Disease Prevention, Inc./BEAT for Health, MD

Valerie Nozea, Executive Director, Mid-Atlantic Asthma Foundation, MD

City of Lansing, Planning & Neighborhood Development, Lansing MI

Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - Michigan Chapter

CLEARCorps/Detroit, Detroit, MI

Bob Theys, Belleville, MI

Dan O'Donoghue, Master of Public Health Student, Kalamazoo, MI

Kay Budas, Kalamazoo, MI

Rhonda Rudolph, Health Educator, Jackson County Health Department, Jackson, MI

Laura Riddell, Mother, Waterford, MI

Joan R Dyer Zyskowski, Program Supervisor, Kent County Health Department Grand Rapids, MI

James Linton, Rives Junction, MI

Courtney Pendleton, Saint Johns, MI

Kellee VanWormer, Learning & Development Specialist, State Farm Insurance, Tekonsha, MI

Courtney Wisinski, Healthy Homes University Project Manager, Lansing, MI

Lisa Phillips, Lawton, MI

Kay Budas, Kalamazoo, MI

Jane Kirk, Scotts MI

Loretta Olmsted, Shelbyville, MI

Nancy Mull, RN, Grand Rapids, MI

Dawn Potter-Williams, Kalamazoo, MI

Walter Zotter, Washington Twp, MI

Amanda Paniccia, Public Health Sanitarian and EBL inspector, Local Health Department, Roseville, MI

John Burhans, 4-H Youth Educator, MSU Extension - Kalamazoo County, Kalamazoo MI

Linda Stewart, Haslett, MI

Ana Gonzalez, Kalamazoo, MI

Lana Davis RN, Zeeland, MI

Cheryl Lariviere, Mason, Michigan

Stephen Manville R.S., Whitmore Lake, MI

Robert Wahl, Okemos, MI

Tiffany Huang, Lansing, MI

Michele Borgia, Haslett, MI

Cindy Foster, Kalamazoo, MI

Andrew L. Discher, Environmental Health Specialist, Mid-MI District Health Department, Stanton, MI

John Texter, Registered Environmental Health Specialist, Michigan Environmental Health Association/National Environmental Health Association, Middleville, MI

Michael A. Schwartz, P.E., Kalamazoo, MI

Hope Stanley, Project Manager, Kalamazoo, MI

Peggy Butler, Benefits Coordinator, Homer, MI

Timothy Kosak, Vicksburg, MI

Matthew P. Kilroy, BS, LRT, WC-C, AE-C, Grand Rapids, MI

Kate Johnson, White Pigeon, MI

Jodi Lange, Senior Account Executive, New Horizons Computer Learning Centers, Grand Rapids, MI

Sandra Mertz, Secretary, Portage, MI

Lee Crossley, Richland, MI

Steve Senesi, Kalamazoo, MI

Deborah Socier, Environmental Health Specialist, Saginaw County Dept. of Public Health City, Saginaw, MI

Tori Johnson, Kalamazoo, MI
Peggy French, RS, Environmental Health Program Coordinator, Allegan County Health Department, Allegan, MI
Steven P. Petrides, Sanitarian Specialist, Kent County Health Department, Grand Rapids, MI
Jennifer Kosak, Vicksburg, MI
Paul Haan, Executive Director, Healthy Homes Coalition of West Michigan Grand Rapids MI
Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - St. Louis Chapter, St. Louis, MO
Maternal, Child and Family Health Coalition, St. Louis, MO
William Kincaid, MD, MPH, Board Chairman, St. Louis Regional Asthma Consortium, MO
Ross I. Palis, MD, Member of Board of Directors, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - St. Louis Chapter, MO
Raymond G. Slavin, MD MS MACP, Director of Allergy and Immunology, Saint Louis University School of Medicine, MO
Hannah G. McClellan, MPH, Sikeston, MO
Dr. Paul Chan, Mid America Heart Institute, University of MO-Kansas City, Kansas City, MO
Katie Lorand, Certified Nurse-Midwife, Midwest Women's Healthcare Specialists Kansas City, MO
Beverly Rutledge, Programs Assistant, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Cathy Steele, Member of Board of Directors, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America - St. Louis Chapter, MO
Dave Birkenmeier, Past President of the AAFA St. Louis Chapter, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Elizabeth Hawkins, Member of the Board of Directors, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Jessica Pasteris, Special Events and Communication Manager, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Jordan Wildermuth, MSW, Program Manager, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Reagan Nelson, Office Coordinator, Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America, St. Louis Chapter, MO
Viviane McKay, MPH, CHES, Clayton-Richmond Heights, MO
Tara Robinson, St. Louis, MO
Kevin Kennedy, CIEC, Manager, Environmental Health Program, Allergy, Asthma, Immunology, Children's Mercy Hospitals and Clinics, Kansas City, MO
Cindy Oberkirsch, Director, Enterprise Holdings, MO
Lisa Lubsch, MD MS MACP, Clinical Pharmacy Specialist, Department of Pharmacy Services, SSM Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center, MO
David V. Reynolds, Facility Management Consultant, MS
Johnny Beason, Jackson, MS
Greensboro Housing Coalition, Greensboro NC
Roy Consulting Group Corporation, Charlotte, NC
NC Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology Society, Hickory, NC
Hickory Allergy and Asthma Clinic, Hickory, NC
Lindsay Herendeen, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Durham, NC
Joseph T. Inglefield III, MD, Hickory, NC
Lead Poisoning Prevention Program City, Asheville, NC
James Matthews, Winston-Salem, NC
Randolph Ball, Environmental Health Program Specialist, Guilford County Dept. of Public Health, Greensboro, NC
Reid Steinkraus, Omaha, NE
Desert Allergy Asthma & Immunology, Henderson, NV
Michael Carrick, Marketing Coordinator, Las Vegas Nightlife Group, NV
Sean McKnight, MD, Henderson, NV

Kathleen Lauckner, Environmental Training Program Coordinator, UNLV Harry Reid Center for Environmental Studies, Las Vegas, NV
Breathe New Hampshire, New Hampshire, NH
Caring Community Network of the Twin Rivers, Franklin, NH
The Way Home, Manchester, NH
William Goodman, MD, Physician, Manchester, NH
Elizabeth Traore, Concord, NH
James C Wells, Member, Franklin Area Healthy Homes Committee, Sanbornton, NH
Owen David, Pittsfield, NH
Matthew Comai, Dir. Env. QA, Merrimack County Nursing Home, Boscawen, NH
Mark R Windt, M.D., North Hampton, NH
MaryAnn Sorensen Allacci PhD, Lakewood, NJ
Mark Schlager, Pennsauken, NJ
Joseph Ponessa, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Housing, Indoor Environment and Health, Rutgers Cooperative Extension, New Brunswick, NJ
NM Alliance for School-Based Health Care, Albuquerque, NM
Michael H. Clayton, MD, MPH, Albuquerque, NM
Shelly Moeller, Evaluator, NM Dept. of Health, Santa Fe, NM
Mary E Shepherd, PhD, MS, Epidemiologist, Santa Fe, NM
Joanne M. Ray, D.O., F.A.A.P., Pediatrician, Casa Alegre Pediatrics, LLC, Las Cruces, NM
Brad Whorton, Santa Fe, NM
Adda Garcia McDonald, BS Ed, RRT, AE-C, Respiratory Therapist, Lead Asthma Educator, Asthma Allies, NM
Kristine Suozzi, New Mexico Health Equity Working Group (NMHEWG), Albuquerque, NM
West Harlem Environmental Action, Inc. New York, NY
Community Cradle, Albany, NY
Dale Tussing, Syracuse, NY
Betty Wolder Levin, Ph.D., Professor, Brooklyn College, CUNY School of Public Health, Brooklyn, NY
Jaime Snyder, Coordinator, Asthma Coalition of Western New York, NY
Constance Bowens, Wappingers Falls, NY
Ernesto Brown, Sanitarian, Westchester County Department of Health, Yonkers, NY
Judy Coyne Becker, Troy, NY
Sharon Markovics, MD, Manhasset, NY
James A Followitz, MD, New York State Society of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology, Scarsdale, NY
Jennifer S Kim, MD, Mt Sinai School of Medicine, New York, NY
Morris W. Bickweat, EPA - NY-Lead Based Paint Risk Assessor, Honeoye Falls, NY
Columbus Public Health, Columbus, Ohio
East Columbus Development Co., Inc., Columbus, OH
Environmental Health Watch, Cleveland, OH
Mary Kay Bossard, Asthma Educator, Cleveland Clinic, Cleveland, OH
Karen Majewski RN, CNP, AE-C, Metro Health Adult Asthma Management Clinic, Cleveland, Ohio
John Richter, Environmental Health Practitioner, Columbus, OH
Wendy Mizanin RN, Columbus, OH
Eileen Nageotte-Wilk, RN-Public Health, Cuyahoga County Board of Health, Bay Village, OH
Erin Reeves, Alexandria, OH
Chris Alexander, Columbus, OH
Sharon Kadon, Loveland, OH
Robert A. Cole, Staff Attorney, Advocates for Basic Legal Equality, Center for Equal Justice, Toledo, OH
Rebecca Callentine, Columbus, OH
Kathleen Morris RN, Columbus, OH

Irene Martin, LPN/Care Manager, Ohio Asthma Coalition/Nurture Disease Management/Buckeye Community Health, Columbus, OH

Phillip Bouton, Program Manager, Healthy Homes Program, Columbus, OH

S Shore, Burbank, CA

Carol Igoe, MA, MS, Coordinator, Lead Poison Prevention Initiative, Arc Hamilton County/SW Ohio, Cincinnati, OH

The National Nursing Centers Consortium / Public Health Management Corporation, Philadelphia, PA

Pinnacle Health/ Childhood Lead Poison Prevention Program, Harrisburg, PA

The Health Annex, Philadelphia, PA

Allison Freeman, Associate, Geisinger Health System, Danville, PA

Thomas M. Vernon, MD, Philadelphia, PA

Maureen George, PhD, RN, AE-C, FAAN, Assistant Professor- Family and Community Health Division University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing, PA

Janice Snyder, Philadelphia, PA

Michelle O'Connell, Philadelphia, PA

Taryn E. Lloyd, RN, BSN, Public Health Nurse, Pinnacle Health Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Harrisburg, PA

Todd Christophel, Concerned Parent of a 2-Year-Old Lead-Poisoned Child, Lititz, PA

John Leary, Philadelphia, PA

Marsha Jo Kuhns, Case Manager, Pinnacle Health Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Harrisburg, PA

Germaine Headen-Gould, Philadelphia, PA

Joe Hughes, IAQ Training Institute, Central City, PA

Jessi Averill, Philadelphia, PA

Kristen Yoh, Case Management Specialist, PinnacleHealth System Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program, Reading, PA

Eudora Burton, Housing Specialist, National Nurses Centers Consortium/Lead Safe Babies, Philadelphia, PA

Todd Ziegler, Philadelphia, PA

Armand C Magnelli, Livable Housing, Inc., York, PA

Catherine Friedman, MD Providence, RI

Rhode Island Lead Technicians, Inc., East Providence RI

Peter Simon MD, MPH, Providence, RI

Roberta Hazen Aaronson, Executive Director, Childhood Lead Action Project, Providence, RI

Karen L Daigle, MD, Director, Pediatric Pulmonology, Hasbro Children's Hospital, Providence, RI

Deborah N. Pearlman, PhD, Research Faculty, Brown University Program in Public Health, Providence, RI

Michael Tweedie, Readyville, TN

Faye Shores Ralston, Manager, Tennessee Lead Elimination Action Program, Middle Tennessee State University, Murfreesboro, TN

Jennifer Tweedie, Readyville, TN

Owens Training, Galveston, TX

Dana Owens, Galveston, TX

Kellie Baxter, Springville, UT

Kay B Walker, MD, certified American Board of Allergy and Immunology, Asthma and Allergy Clinic of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT

Katharine Hastings, Principal, Cadmus Group, Arlington, VA

Catherine Brooks President, Eco-Strip, Reston, VA

Janet A. Phoenix, MD MPH, Executive Director, Coalition for Environmentally Safe Communities, VA

Grace Tamesis MD MPH, Physician, Norfolk, VA

Maryann Chicko, Fredericksburg, VA

City of Burlington, Community & Economic Development Office, Burlington, VT

Comprehensive Health Education Foundation, Seattle, WA

Washington Asthma Initiative, Seattle, WA
Northwest Physicians Network, Tacoma, WA
James Krieger, MD, MPH, Seattle, WA
Greg L. Ledgerwood, MD, AAFP, ACAAI, AE-C, Chairman, Practitioner Support Committee, Washington Asthma Initiative, WA
Janet Primomo, Ph.D., RN, Associate Professor, Nursing Program, University of Washington Tacoma, WA
Reva Wittenberg, MPA, Asthma Program Manager, Washington State Department of Health, WA
Erin Donohue-Zink, R.N., B.S.N., ALA Volunteer, WA
Marijo Ratcliffe, MN, ARNP, PNP, Seattle Children's Hospital, Pulmonary Dept
Pediatric Pulmonary Center Training Grant, Dept of Pediatrics, University of WA, WA
Paul V. Williams, MD, Allergist, Northwest Asthma & Allergy Center, WA
Kathleen Lehman, Seattle, WA
Peggy D. King, BSN, MFA, Public Health Nurse Consultant and Early Childhood Specialist, Kids Northwest, WA
Cheryl Whitcomb, Seattle, WA
Sarah Knerr, Seattle, WA
Joseph Schirmer, SEIU Wisconsin, AFL-CIO, Madison, WI
Amy Murphy, Former Manager of the City of Milwaukee Home Environmental Health Division and Former CDC CLPPP Advisory Committee Member, Milwaukee, WI
Pam Campbell, IS Data Services, Madison, WI
Reghan Walsh, Public Health Educator, SEIU 1199, Madison, WI
Ramona Jensen, Head Start City Wide Lead Liaison, Social Development Commission, Milwaukee, WI
Daniel McClung, Environmental Health Specialist, Division Of Public Health Bureau of Occupational and Environmental Health Asbestos and Lead, Madison, WI
Food Allergy Association of Wisconsin Inc., Madison, WI

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