

EVENT SUMMARY
Getting Healthy: Looking Beyond Health Care
May 15, 2009

The Alliance for Health Reform, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, held a briefing in Room 325 of the Russell Senate Office Building to address the non-medical factors that influence health, such as education level and diet, and to review the recommendations of the foundation's Commission to Build a Healthier America.

Ed Howard, executive vice president at the Alliance for Health Reform, extended a welcome from Senators Rockefeller and Collins. He also thanked the panelists for their participation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for sponsoring the event. Mr. Howard noted that only a small portion of our overall health is attributed to health care; much of our health is determined by our social and physical environment.

The co-moderator, **Robin Mockenhaupt**, chief of staff of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, explained why the foundation's Commission to Build a Healthier America was established. She explained that America spends 17 percent of its GDP on health care, yet we are not the healthiest people in the world. "For the first time, we are raising a generation of children who may live sicker and shorter lives than their parents," Dr. Mockenhaupt told the audience. The commission worked to raise awareness of the non-medical and social factors affecting health, and to identify areas for action, she explained.

The first panelist, **David Williams**, staff director of the Commission to Build a Healthier America, pointed out that the commission consisted of a diverse non-traditional group of experts whose charge was to explore health and wellness in America. He also discussed that America is losing ground to other industrialized countries in respect to health indicators such as infant mortality. In 2002, America was ranked 25th in the world for infant mortality, a drop from 1980 when America was ranked 18th. Dr. Williams stated that there is a direct relationship between more education and longer life, and between higher incomes and longer life. However Americans at every education and income level should be healthier, he said. Dr. Williams also stated that expanding social and economic opportunities and resources will be a step in the right direction toward improving the health of Americans, reinforced by policies that foster healthier homes, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces.

The second panelist, **Paula Braveman**, of the University of California at San Francisco, research director for the commission, discussed in greater detail the importance of the correlation between education and health. Dr. Braveman stated that education is linked to health in all racial/ethnic groups, and influences how well and how long adults live. People who do not complete high school are two times more likely than college graduates to have sub-optimal health. She presented data showing that all fifty states and the District of Columbia show a large gap in health status for the less well-educated vs. college graduated. This comparison demonstrates how socioeconomic status can be used as a strong predictor of health. Dr. Braveman also stated that policymakers need to see education policy as health policy.

The third panelist, **Senator Bill Frist**, professor at Vanderbilt University and member of the commission, noted that medical care is an important way to improve health, but that addressing social determinants of health is the most effective way to improve the health and wellness of Americans. Senator Frist stated that health requires personal responsibility and a societal commitment to remove the obstacles that prevent many Americans from achieving good health. For example, better health can be achieved by creating public-private partnerships to increase access to healthy foods by sustaining full-service grocery stores in communities that currently do not have adequate access to fresh fruits and vegetables. He also discussed how important it is to become a smoke-free nation and to build healthy communities by integrating safety and wellness into every aspect of community life.

A lively question and answer session followed.