

March 16, 2004

The Honorable Bill Frist, MD
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tom Daschle
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Majority Leader Frist and Minority Leader Daschle:

The undersigned organizations are writing to thank you for your continued support for the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health and health care. And, like you, we are steadfastly committed to eliminating health disparities. As you are aware, disparities in health and health care continue to cost families and the nation far too much – in pain, suffering, illness, disabilities, premature deaths, and economically.

Collectively and individually, we are very encouraged by the attention that you have brought to this national health crisis. We appreciate the assistance provided through your leadership and efforts. And, we applaud your expressions of support.

"We know that African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans die younger and suffer from heart disease, diabetes and HIV/AIDS at higher rates than everyone else. These numbers are unacceptable. We are beginning to understand why, and as majority leader I am going to address them." [Majority Leader Frist, Capitol Hill Watch, Feb 13, 2004]

"A year and a half ago, a major report was released by the distinguished Institute of Medicine. That report, entitled "Unequal Treatment," confirmed what many people had long known, or at least suspected: In America, minorities receive poorer quality health care than non-minorities - even when both groups have roughly the same insurance coverage, the same income, the same age and the same health conditions. This is more than a minority issue or a health care issue. It is a moral issue. We must end these deadly disparities in health care." [Minority Leader Daschle, Health Disparities Proposal Remarks, Oct. 21, 2003]

As we are all keenly aware, communities of color are disproportionately burdened by acute and chronic diseases. Communities of color, also, are subjected to disparities in the quality of care they receive. This occurs across the full spectrum of disease categories, and in medical and surgical procedures. The compilation of Federal government findings and scientific studies – from those outlined in the 1985 *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black and Minority Health*, to the 2002 IOM Study entitled, *Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care*, to those on HIV/AIDS, cancer, heart disease and all that fall in between – document a compelling case for a national Federal response. Indeed, racial and ethnic disparities in health and health care are an ongoing national crisis in health that must be addressed comprehensively.

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It is against this backdrop of continuing disparities that we respectfully request that you combine your efforts and work to ensure enactment of an elimination of health disparities bill that –

- Implements the IOM Unequal Treatment Study recommendations;
- Reduces the number of uninsured;
- Ensures delivery of quality health care;
- Responds to the cultural and linguistic voids in care;
- Effectively addresses data collection, reporting, analysis and utilization;
- Strengthens the health care safety net infrastructure;
- Ensures accountability;
- Strengthens the Office for Civil Rights and the Office of Minority Health;
- Enhances research opportunities;
- Appropriately funds elimination of health disparities programs and projects including the Minority HIV/AIDS Initiative, REACH, OCR and OMH;
- Establishes community health empowerment zones;
- Fosters innovative outreach programs;
- Reduces disease and related complications;
- Promotes wellness and prevention;
- Increases workforce diversity throughout the health arena; and
- Establishes offices of minority health at key Federal agencies including CMS and FDA.

Clearly, the measure must not weaken existing minority health programs and funding. Please know that we are fully committed to working with you to help ensure enactment of such legislation.

We strongly believe that the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health and health care is within your combined reach. The American people in general and communities of color in particular are counting on you. Please – work together -- far too many lives are at stake. It is against this backdrop of health challenges and opportunities that we, the undersigned organizations, request a meeting with you. To respond to this letter, please contact Fredette West, Chair, Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Coalition. She can be reached at 301-855-7008, or by email at healthalliance@ix.netcom.com.

Again, the undersigned organizations thank you for your leadership, support and expressed commitment to the elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health and health care. We look forward to working with you on this national health crisis.

Sincerely,

- African American Health Alliance*
- National Medical Association*
- Asian and Pacific Islander American Health Forum*
- Summit Health Institute on Research and Education, Inc.*
- National Black Caucus of State Legislatures*

- Consortium of Social Science Associations*
- National Hispanic Medical Association*
- Physicians for Human Rights*
- Out of Many, One Coalition*
- National Black Nurses Association*
- National Hispanic Nurses Association*
- The Cave Institute*
- National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education*
- National Kidney Foundation
- American Public Health Association
- Breast Cancer Resource Committee, Inc.
- Association of University Centers on Disabilities
- National Association of Community Health Centers
- Arkansas Minority Health Commission
- Intercultural Cancer Council Caucus
- National Association of Local Boards of Health
- National Haitian American Health Alliance
- AIDS Action
- The Manhattan Central Medical Society
- Association of Teachers of Preventive Medicine
- Papa Ola Lokahi!
- American Academy of Physician Assistants
- National Conference for Community and Justice
- Families USA
- American Heart Association
- Center for Community Health, Education & Research, Inc.

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- The Gerontological Society of America
- Community Supportive Living Systems
- American Association of Colleges of Nursing
- National Health Law Program
- African American Mental Health Initiative
- Howard University Cancer Center
- Allen Temple HIV/AIDS & Health
- National Association of Black Veterans [St. Petersburg/Jacksonville Chpt.s]
- Health Action Forum of Prince George's County
- The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization
- MOTTEP [Minority Organ Tissue Transplantation Program]
- Aesclepius Medical Society, Inc.
- Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs
- National Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)
Research Network for Health Services and Health Disparities

* Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities Coalition Member Organization

cc: The Honorable Edward Kennedy
The Honorable Mary Landrieu
Chair and Health Chair, Congressional Black Caucus
Chair and Health Chair, Congressional Hispanic Caucus
Chair and Health Chair, Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus
Chair and Health Chair, Congressional Native American Caucus
Chair, Health Disparities Caucus