



Department of Social Development and World Peace
Office of Domestic Social Development

Background on Children's Health and the Environment
February 2007

ISSUE

Children are more vulnerable to environmental hazards. Their bodies, behaviors and size leave them more exposed than adults to such health hazards. Because children are exposed to environmental hazards at an early age, they have more extended time to develop slowly-progressing environmentally triggered illnesses such as asthma, certain cancers and learning disabilities. Exposure to air pollutants and toxins is significantly more harmful to children, born and unborn. Children in poverty and children of color are at a disproportionate risk, with routinely higher rates of lead poisoning and asthma-related deaths and hospitalization.

BACKGROUND

In an effort to develop the leadership of Catholic institutions to help address environmental hazards affecting children's health, a coalition of major Catholic organizations formed the *Catholic Coalition for Children and a Safe Environment* (CASE).¹ This network of national Catholic institutions assists the bishops in sharing Church teaching on the environment, justice, the common good, stewardship and option for the poor, and how these social teachings urge us as Catholics to care for creation and protect the lives of children who are vulnerable to environmental threats.

CASE partners have collaborated as speakers in diocesan and parish gatherings, especially during Respect for Life month and for the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. Other highlights from 2006 activities included:

- The 2006-2007 Respect Life Program includes the article contributed by the Department of Social Development, "*Protecting Children in their First Environment, the Womb,*" which is being used by CASE partners and others to educate people in the dioceses, parishes, Catholic lay organizations and Catholic institutions about the importance of protecting children's health and the environment from hazards from before birth.
- In July 2006, CASE partner, Knights of Peter Claver and Ladies Auxiliary, featured their new educational DVD, *Struggles for Environmental Justice and Health in Chicago: African American and Catholic Perspectives*, during their national convention held in Houston, TX. The new DVD will be distributed through USCCB Publishing.

¹ CASE is made up of the following members: Catholic Charities USA (CCUSA); Catholic Health Association (CHA); Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI); Conference for Catholic Facility Management (CCFM); Knights of Peter Claver, Inc. and Ladies Auxiliary (KPC); National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW); National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA); National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD); National Catholic Rural Life Conference (NCRLC); and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and Office for Domestic Social Development.

Policy

In January 2007, several CASE partners (USCCB, Catholic Charities USA, the Catholic Health Association of the United States, Catholic Health Initiatives, Catholic Healthcare West, National Catholic Partnership on Disability, National Catholic Rural Life Conference and National Council of Catholic Women) signed a joint letter to the leadership of the House and Senate Appropriations Committees expressing their support for additional funding in FY 2007 for implementation of the National Children's Study, a longitudinal study of 100,000 pregnant women whose children will be followed from before birth until age 21. The study, which is being coordinated by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, will provide information about environmental threats that may affect children's physical, mental, emotional and developmental health.

In the past, USCCB and CASE partners have supported other legislative initiatives aimed at protecting human health and addressing the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on low-income and vulnerable. We have addressed federal regulations and legislation that support our country's ability to track chronic illnesses that might be connected to environmental influences (nationwide health tracking); have called for the reduction of mercury pollution; and a ban on testing of pesticides on children and pregnant women in both legislation and regulation.

Catholic organizations joined others in successfully urging the EPA to ensure the protection of pregnant women and children from unnecessary and potentially harmful testing of pesticides. According to the EPA, "Under the new rules all third-party intentional dosing research on pesticides involving pregnant or nursing women and children intended for submission to EPA is banned, and EPA will neither conduct nor support any intentional dosing studies that involve pregnant or nursing women or children for all substances EPA regulates."

USCCB POSITION

As Catholics, we are called to care for God's gift of creation and to protect the most vulnerable among us. Caught in a spiral of poverty and environmental degradation, the poor and the powerless bear a disproportionate burden of the effects of environmental problems, as their lands and neighborhoods are more likely to be polluted, to be near toxic waste dumps, or to suffer from water contamination.

In the face of these challenges, the Catholic community is an integral part of learning more, caring more, and doing more about the environment and the threats to it, and to our children. "For generations, the Catholic community has reached out to children... We have defended their right to life itself and their right to live with dignity, to realize the bright promise and opportunity of childhood. Now we renew this commitment and build on it. We seek to bring new hope and concrete help to a generation of children at risk." (*Putting Children and Families First*, p. 17).

WHAT YOU CAN DO

✓ Urge Congress to support initiatives, including research, that protect children and our communities from environmental harm.

✓ Urge Congress and the Administration to protect children from exposure to harmful toxins such as lead and mercury.

✓ Urge your local and state authorities to fund initiatives intended to assist public and private schools in providing an environment free of health hazards.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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