



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of Domestic Social Development

CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT
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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 organizations and networks 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, stewardship, justice, the common good, and the priority 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.

On April 30, 2007, CASE members hosted a major Catholic consultation on the effects of environmental toxins on unborn children, "Protecting Human Life and Caring for Creation," held at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This unprecedented and groundbreaking event brought together prominent leaders from the Catholic community, government, and the public health sector to learn more about how unborn children are exposed to environmental harm, how this exposure affects them later in life, and what can be done to better protect them. This event and its planning was truly a conference-wide effort. The Secretariat on Pro-Life Activities joined the Office of Domestic Social Development and other CASE partners to help make this event possible. Building on this collaboration, in July 2008 a convocation on "Life, Justice & Family: Partners in the New Evangelization" included a session on "Toxins, the Environment and the Child in the Womb."

In May 2007, members of the USCCB's International Policy Committee and Domestic Policy Committee unanimously agreed to follow through on this unprecedented effort and to bring our distinctive Catholic voice to this issue. The USCCB and other CASE partners sent a joint letter to the leadership of Senate and House Appropriations Committees in explicit and strong support of adequate funding in FY 2009 for the continued implementation of the National Children's Study (NCS), 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.

Last year, Congress passed the Consumer Product Safety Commission Reform Act, tightening the safety rules governing toys and lowering lead levels in all children's toys. 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 people. We have addressed federal regulations

¹ CASE is made up of: 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) Office for Domestic Social Development and Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities.

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.

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 called to learn more, care more, and do more about the environmental threats 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).

RESOURCES

A DVD on the consultation, which includes presentations by Catholic leaders, government officials, and public health experts, is available. A study guide to accompany the DVD is currently being developed. To request a copy of the DVD or study guide, please use the contact e-mail below.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Contact your Congressional representatives and call for greater support of initiatives and research, including continued funding for the National Children's Study, to 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

Contact Cecilia Calvo at (202) 541-3188, ccalvo@usccb.org; or visit usccb.org/case.