

# The NATION'S HEALTH

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Photo courtesy Solar Richmond

Solar Richmond workers celebrate after installing a solar panel system on the home of a low-income resident in Richmond, Va.

## Public health workers leading by example

### Green workplace practices making an impact on health

Second in a series of stories on climate change and health in conjunction with APHA's 2008 National Public Health Week observance, which takes place April 7-13 and has a theme of "Climate Change: Our Health in the Balance."

**L**IKE MANY — if not most — of her public health colleagues nationwide, Virginia St. Jean is strapped for time and funding. But when the San Francisco-based chemist saw a chance to inject new energy into a fundamental public health goal — keeping the places people work and live healthy and safe — she jumped at the opportunity.

That opportunity was the burgeoning "green" movement, a growing national discussion about how individual, business and workplace practices impact environmental sus-

tainability, a changing climate and community health. And while regulating workplaces for health

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## More U.S. physicians educated overseas

### Shortage of doctors in primary care may harm health of nation

**W**ITH NEW federal findings bolstering concerns about shrinking ranks of primary care physicians, advocates are looking to critically underbudgeted programs that — if properly funded — could help prevent a widening of the health care gap.

According to research released by the U.S. Government Accountability Office in February, U.S. medical school graduates enrolled in primary care residency programs, such as family medicine and pediatrics, fell from 23,800 in 1995 to just more than 22,100 in 2006. While there are many reasons behind the declining primary care numbers, GAO pointed to an "undervaluing" of the field within the health care

marketplace as well as an over-reliance on specialty services as main contributing factors. The widening income gap between primary care physicians and those in specialty fields warrants more federal attention, GAO reported, especially as access to primary care is often associated with better health outcomes and less health care costs. A. Bruce Steinwald, director of GAO's health care team, presented



Photo by Ethan Myerson, courtesy iStockphoto

the agency's findings in testimony during a Feb. 12 Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions hearing on the "Crisis in the Primary Care Physician Workforce."

With the number of U.S. medical school graduates enrolled in primary care residency programs dropping, a shortage is looming.

"A paradox commonly cited about the U.S. health care system is that the nation spends more per capita than all other industrialized nations but ranks consistently low in such quality and access measures as life expectancy, infant mortality, preventable deaths and percentage of population with health insurance," Steinwald reported.

GAO's testimony comes as Congress considers the future of the federal effort known as Title VII, a program administered via the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration and created to shore up the nation's supply of primary care medicine and dentistry professionals as well as to improve diversity among medical students. Title VII supports primary care education and training through a variety of means, including scholarships and loans, and plays a critical role in bringing primary care to under-served and disadvantaged communities. Unlike specialty fields, primary care is an "essential foundation of a well-performing health system" and often serves as the "patient's door into the health care system and the patient's guide through the system," according to hearing testi-

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## Americans calling for reform of U.S. health care system

**T**HE debate over how to fix the nation's health care system is heating up as U.S. presidential candidates tout their health reform plans to an electorate that seems eager for change. But while Americans are asking for reform, there is little agreement on how to achieve it.

That the nation's health care system is ailing and in need of a cure is undeniable. Health care costs have increased dramatically in recent decades, and more Americans are without health insurance than ever

before. Census Bureau estimates released this summer showed 47 million people, or 15.8 percent of the U.S. population, were without

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## Hospitals, health settings lead the way

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and environmental threats has long been the standard, many employers and employees are going above and beyond to reduce their impact even more, whether it be by simply installing new recycling bins or by constructing entire buildings in ways that save energy, conserve nearby water sources and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Many such goals reflect longstanding missions

of public health, and with science linking climate change effects with poor health, public health workers

aren't only helping their communities make

change, they're leading by example.

For St. Jean, CIH, an industrial hygienist and green programs manager in the San Francisco Department of Public Health, the green light bulb turned on as she worked classifying hazardous materials and amassing databases of toxic chemicals. She realized how much she enjoyed educating and helping businesses reduce their toxic impacts, and yet there was no awards system for businesses going beyond compliance. At the same time, St. Jean said, a number of green business programs were popping up around the Bay area, and she wanted San Francisco's program to have a strong public health component. In 2002, the department unveiled Clean & Green, an initiative that offers free pollution prevention workshops, environmental tools and health education to help San Francisco businesses reduce or avoid use of toxic chemicals.

"We have people really pushing the green envelope and so we have to be careful as to what products we push," St. Jean told *The Nation's Health*. "We have to be fair and keep science in the equation. It's very easy

to have an environmental trade-off...There have been some things we thought would be greener, but were actually more toxic."

So far, more than 40 businesses have earned the Clean & Green logo. The program currently covers auto and marine repair as well as auto body shops, though St. Jean said she is hoping to expand to printers and dry cleaners. The effort, she said, is dynamic and always changing, as the science moves forward, regulations change and

alternative products wait to pass muster. Clean & Green was a precursor to the 2003 launch of the San Francisco City and County Green Business

Program, which certifies all kinds of businesses in going green and which had a waiting list of businesses seeking recognition even before the program opened its doors.

Besides helping businesses go green, St. Jean

and her colleagues are changing their own workplace as well, beefing up their recycling program and moving toward a vehicle fleet of mostly hybrids or cars that run on natural gas. Similar actions are on the agenda across the country in Florida — a state particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change — where public health workers launched their Lean to Green initiative in January. As part of an executive order that state agencies lead by example, the Florida Department of Health has drafted a green protocol for its work practices that deals with everything from telecommuting to reminding workers to turn off their computers.

"Small changes can have an enormous impact, so everybody has a role," said Lisa Conti, DVM, MPH, director of the department's Division of Environmental Health. "This is really an opportunity for the department of health to show that we can have an impact."

According to Daniel Parker, MSP, assistant director in the Division of Environmental Health and author of the protocol, Lean to Green is one of the ways the health department can support Florida's growing efforts to address climate



Photo by Greg Knobloch, courtesy CDC

From left, John Scheves of Emory Recycling and Willie Potter of CDC look over some of the office paper recycled by the agency.

change and was written to encourage both individual and collective actions in the workplace. The protocol not only explains why and how changes are good for the environment, but the physical and mental health benefits of going green.

For example, by offering flexible work schedules that support employees in working at least one day from home and not driving to work, the department of health can help reduce car-related carbon dioxide pollution by more than 1 million pounds, the protocol reports. An added plus is that such work policies have been shown to increase worker productivity, decrease absenteeism and reap employee satisfaction points, Parker said.

Other Lean to Green recommendations include supporting carpooling, bicycling and walking; purchasing electronics from vendors with high standards of recycling and offset initiatives; supporting green roofs and solar energy at all health department facilities; and adding green objectives to all strategic plans. Parker emphasized that Lean to Green is a "work in progress" and a jumping board for people to discuss new ideas — ideas he hopes workers are bringing back to their homes, families and neighbors.

"Climate change will be the public health issue of

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## From greening workplaces to greening workers

**A**S THE "green wave" sweeps across America, activists are working to make sure all communities can catch the ride and reap the benefits of a healthier future.

With an emerging green-collar economy and growing demand for workers with green knowledge and skills, community activists are highlighting the intersections between poverty, pollution and environmental justice, and helping to build a green economy that benefits all. In Chicago, greening the city while teaching job skills is becoming a tradition. For more than a decade, the city's Department of Environment has been training former prisoners and unemployed residents in

horticulture and green skills, sending them out to assist community groups interested in greening neighborhood landscapes.

In the past few years, however, the program, known as Greencorps Chicago, has added a number of new aspects, according to Suzanne Malec-McKenna, the department's commissioner. Greencorps trainees now work at the city's recently opened household chemical and computer recycling center, learning how to assess computers to determine whether they should be recycled or fixed up and sold, at a low price, to schools, community centers or families with at-risk youth. Greencorps trainees are also helping low-income residents review their energy efficiency and weatherize their homes.

After graduating from Greencorps, the city helps participants find internships and jobs in the private sector.

"Chicago has large numbers of people coming out of the penal system and you have to be able to do something to provide opportunities for folks to turn their lives around," said department spokesman Larry Merritt. "You're helping the environment, you're recycling lives."

Green opportunities are happening to the east in Richmond, Va., as well with the launch of Solar Richmond. Started in 2006, Solar Richmond works with a city-run employment program to train mostly unemployed and underemployed residents in solar construction. As part of the training, according to Solar Richmond Director Michele

McGeoy, participants install a solar system on a low-income home. The program benefits are two-fold: to provide job training and skills and to use those green skills to bring environmental stewardship to every community. McGeoy said she sees the program as a public health partner, as Solar Richmond provides an antidote to pollution through energy efficiency and an antidote to violence by providing jobs.

"This work is so tightly tied to public health — a combination of cleaning up our Earth, living sustainably and providing meaningful work," she said.

For more on green-collar jobs, visit [www.solarrichmond.org](http://www.solarrichmond.org) or [www.cityofchicago.org/environment](http://www.cityofchicago.org/environment). ■

— Kim Krisberg

## More U.S. workplaces are going green

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this century," he told *The Nation's Health*.

Just north of the Florida Department of Health in Atlanta, Ga., workers at the nation's top public health agency are transforming their places of work as well. In early February, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention rolled out its Green and Healthy initiative, an effort to green CDC's facilities and campuses by combining environmental stewardship and health promotion. Long before Green and Healthy, CDC had an ongoing commitment to sustainability, such as creating ways that CDC buildings use less water and energy, but the new effort continues to build on past success with the added help of hundreds of employees, said Liz York, CDC's acting chief sustainability officer.

"This initiative, in particular, is about personal accountability — we all make choices every day that affect our health and the world's health," York said. "It's an ecosystem issue — if the world is falling down around us, we can't be healthy."

With the active engagement of 300 employees from across CDC's departments, Green and Healthy is composed of workgroups focusing on issues such as transportation, green purchasing, green communications, electronics management and recycling. For example, the transportation group is examining ways to promote walking, instead of driving, within CDC's campus; what kind of travel policies CDC should have,

such as train versus plane travel; when a teleconference should be organized instead of meeting in person; and how to get better fuel efficiency from CDC's vehicle fleet. The electronics workgroup is looking into ways to purchase computers without mercury in their motherboards as well as equipment that can be safely recycled at the end of their useful lives. As a way to reduce reliance on foods that depend on fossil-fueled transportation to get to their destinations, CDC's food workgroup is looking into partnering with local farmers or joining a local food cooperative. And a cafeteria workgroup is working to bring about healthier eating choices and eliminate plastic foam cups and plates.

Of course, York said, priorities are still being developed and carefully vetted. For example, workers are weighing whether trading foam supplies for dishes that have to be washed many times per day is better for the environment.

"We don't want to jump onto something that might be worse," she noted.

While such public health work makes the case for why a green activity is also a healthy activity, York said, the thought process can go in the opposite direction as well. For instance, promoting lactation rooms for breastfeeding is a long-held public health priority, but lactation rooms are also green, as more breastfeeding means less disposable formula packaging.

"What we're truly trying to get is integration of these ideas into our work habits," York said. "We want people to start thinking

about the choices they're making."

### Health care taking the green plunge

Wielding significant leverage in the consumer marketplace, health care settings and hospitals are also diving into the green movement, oftentimes leading to greener products that everyone can use.

Efforts began to gain momentum more than a decade ago when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reported that the health industry was the nation's third largest producer of dioxin, a pollutant of medical incineration. Shortly after the report, Health Care Without Harm was launched, and with its help, the number of medical waste incinerators went from 3,000 to less than 100 today. The organization, which now has almost 500 member organizations in more than 50 countries, has also helped the industry in virtually

eliminating mercury products and in securing healthier, safer waste technologies. With their vast purchasing power, hospitals can demand products that currently do not exist, said Anna Gilmore Hall, executive director of Health Care Without Harm.

"One of the first things we're supposed to do is to do no harm...and we want to make sure that as an industry we're doing everything we can to do that," Hall said.

To move that vision forward, Health Care Without Harm helped launch its sister organization, Practice Greenhealth, in March. Practice Greenhealth, which replaces an earlier group known as Hospitals for a Healthy Environment, combines three main programs. The first helps hospitals go green by using alternatives to chemical products and reducing the volume and toxicity of medical waste, while the second promotes the Green Guide



Photo courtesy San Francisco Department of Public Health

Tommy Navarro, of Wynn's Motors in San Francisco, shows how a parts washer uses detergent and water instead of solvents.

for Health Care, a tool for designing green hospital facilities that will soon be used by the U.S. Green Building Council to certify such buildings. Cleaner energy is the focus of the third program, which will use an online auction to allow hospitals to post proposals for their clean energy needs and let companies bid on the contracts.

"Our goal is to have the health care industry reduce their ecological footprint completely," Hall told *The Nation's Health*. "And we

**"We all make choices every day that affect our health and the world's health. It's an ecosystem issue — if the world is falling down around us, we can't be healthy."**

— Liz York

believe this will ripple out to safer alternatives for society and the public in general." And it already has: In 2004, a new type of carpet was introduced, thanks to health care giant Kaiser Permanente. During construction work on a Kaiser facility, planners decided they didn't want to use carpet made with PVC, which can release dioxin and other harmful chemicals into the environment. So in response, Kaiser Permanente laid down a challenge to manufacturers: create an alternative to PVC-backed carpet within two years that is appropriate for health care settings and secure a contract with Kaiser. The wager was a success and now the carpeting is used in all kinds of settings, said Kathy Gerwig, Kaiser Permanente's vice president for workplace safety and its environmental stewardship officer.

"What we learned in that experience is that as big as

we think we are...To reinvent a product to be environmentally safer is a big undertaking and there were plenty of firms who decided not to play," Gerwig said. "But we can push the market in that direction...and when we're not big enough to do it on our own, we can bring our friends to the party."

Back at the San Francisco Department of Public Health, workers have definitely played on market sensibilities to bring businesses to the green movement, challenging them to become Clean & Green certified and attract green-conscious dollars.

For Carolyn Coquillette, owner of San Francisco's Luscious Garage, working with public health officials helped her build a green business from the ground up and become one of Clean & Green's star students. Such a mission may have been easier for Luscious Garage, which holds environmental sustainability as one of its mandates, but is nonetheless time-consuming and demands vigilance, Coquillette said. The garage brews its own windshield cleaner using vinegar and water, uses re-refined motor oil, depends on solar energy for lighting, uses plants to help filter the air inside the shop and finds suppliers that employ similar green practices.

"Business owners have a great opportunity to make an impact," Coquillette said. "But you really have to think differently about how you work. It's the changing of our minds that's so hard to do."

For more about green and healthy workplaces, visit [www.cdc.gov/nceh](http://www.cdc.gov/nceh) or [www.noharm.org/us](http://www.noharm.org/us). ■

— Kim Krisberg



Photo courtesy San Francisco Department of Public Health

From left, Pat Cadam and Nick Rothman, of Pat's Garage and Green Gears in San Francisco, show off two electric vehicles.