



## News Release

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### **Plan outlines actions to improve health equity**

*Focus on behavioral health, environmental issues, poverty*

OLYMPIA – How can we make sure that people in Washington have equal access to health care and healthy environments? Many in Washington – especially people of color – have trouble staying healthy because of low income, or living or working in an unhealthy environment.

New recommendations from the Governor’s Interagency Council on Health Disparities will focus on ways to improve health equity in Washington by:

- Reducing disparities of access and quality of behavioral health services and outcomes.
- Reducing health disparities from environmental exposures and hazards.
- Reducing poverty and its effects on health disparities.

The council’s recommendations are outlined in “[2012 State Policy Action Plan to Eliminate Health Disparities](#).” The council’s task is to eliminate health disparities that stem from race, ethnicity, and gender. The action plan spells out the council’s top priorities for consideration by the governor and the legislature.

“We know budget limitations are a reality,” said Emma Medicine White Crow, chair of the council. “That’s why we wanted to highlight areas the state can work toward implementing with existing resources. We also know more resources would be needed to fully carry them out.”

The council, which was created in 2006, has 17 members, including representatives from 14 state agencies, boards, and commissions. In addition to health and social service agencies, the council has representatives from the departments of Commerce, Agriculture, and Ecology, and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, among others. It relied on three advisory committees to

develop policy recommendations for the new action plan, updated from a 2010 version. That plan addressed education, health insurance coverage, health care workforce diversity, obesity, and diabetes.

The action plan highlights how health disparities affect some populations more than others. For example, Native American men can expect to live seven fewer years than their white neighbors, and black mothers are twice as likely to have their babies die during their first year of life as white mothers. Those come about because of what are called “social determinants” – personal behaviors, factors related to health care, environmental conditions and personal resources, along with early life experiences.

The term “health disparities” describes the higher rates of disease, disability, and death among certain groups when compared to the general population. Serious disparities among racial/ethnic groups in Washington are well documented. More information is on the council’s [website](#).

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The board’s mission is to provide statewide leadership in advancing policies that protect and improve the public’s health. It does this by reviewing and monitoring the health status of all people in Washington; analyzing policies, providing guidance, and developing rules; promoting system partnerships; and encouraging public engagement in the public health system. For more information, visit the [Board of Health website](#).