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**Response from the Trust for America's Health and Local Community Advocates
to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's
National Report on Human Exposure to Environmental Chemicals**

Washington, DC, January 31, 2003 – “The CDC’s exposure report highlights the importance of health tracking so this nation can better understand, respond to, and prevent current and emerging health threats to people across the country,” Shelley A. Hearne, DrPH, Executive Director of the Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) said today.

Hearne added, “Congress needs to charge the CDC with expanding biomonitoring capacity to all states, ensuring that more chemicals can be tested. This would allow us to test for potential chemical weapons like sarin and VX nerve gas as well as additional chemicals that could be linked to chronic diseases such as cancer.

Biomonitoring is an essential part of creating a truly modern public health defense – a comprehensive biomonitoring capacity could be used to do “double duty” to protect our nation’s health by detecting both environmental exposures and potential terrorism events.

Currently, our public health laboratories are not prepared to do rapid testing in the event of chemical terrorism. In order to be able to rapidly respond to events where time can make the difference in saving lives, our nation’s biomonitoring capacity needs to be greatly enhanced. At the present time, only the CDC has biomonitoring capabilities to analyze the impact of chemical-based exposures. This has led to delays, for example, in determining the exposures experienced by the firefighters and other front-line responders during the September 11th, 2001 attack on the World Trade Centers in New York.”

Hearne points out the value of the CDC exposure report to community health advocates. TFAH’s community partners are looking to the report as a first step in their ongoing investigations into clusters of chronic diseases with potential links to chemical exposures.

In Anniston, Alabama, community members have created a local organization called Community Against Pollution (CAP) in response to high rates of diseases such as cancer and asthma in their town, which many suspect may be linked to extremely high levels of PCB pollution. CAP has called upon federal, state, and local health officials to conduct a study to determine the impact on the community’s health. Results from the CDC exposure report give CAP members the increased ability to compare the levels of chemicals in their area to the national levels. According to Shirley Baker, spokesperson for CAP, “We have anxiously awaited the release of the CDC exposure report, so that we can compare national levels of PCB’s, dioxin and lead to the levels found in Anniston.

The report would be even more beneficial to affected communities like ours if it took the next step and made some connections between the chemical in humans and potential health effects.”

Jill McElheney, a health activist in Georgia, has been examining the links between health and the environment since her own son was diagnosed with childhood leukemia at the age of four. After her son’s diagnosis, Jill discovered that her family had been drinking and using well water contaminated with a dangerous mix of carcinogenic chemicals, yet she still does not know what caused her son’s illness. Jill believes that the CDC report is a valuable tool for giving the public important information about exposure levels, but it is only the first step to discovering how the environment impacts human health. “The report needs to be written in language that explains what the data means to the average person,” said Jill. “A list of chemicals and exposure measurements is a beginning, but until the answer to the question of causation is addressed, pediatric cancer rates will continue to rise.”

Sixteen children have been diagnosed with an acute form of leukemia since 1997, in Fallon, NV. Three of these children have died. According to state health officials, based on cases reported to the state cancer registry, there should only be one case of leukemia every five years in the county. Initial results released by the CDC last summer found that 80% of the people tested in Fallon have high levels of tungsten and arsenic in their urine. Further results from CDC’s exposure study of Fallon will be released February 6 at a town meeting so that the data can be compared with the national levels of exposure. Fallon residents are requesting that additional research be done to examine potential links between chemical exposures and the leukemia cluster.

Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) is a national nonprofit whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities from current and emerging threats by strengthening the fundamentals of our public health defenses. More information about TFAH is available at www.healthyamericans.org.

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