For Immediate Release
March 6, 2002

Contact:
Amy Goffe, 202-589-0940

Air Pollution-Cancer Study Underscores Need For Nationwide Health Tracking

Trust for America's Health Director Testifies at Senate Hearing

Washington, DC – On the same day that the Senate Health Committee turned its attention to the issue, a groundbreaking study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* added further evidence to the need for nationwide health tracking.

The Trust for America's Health (TFAH), a Washington, DC-based advocacy group, says the study underscores the need to track the incidence of chronic diseases and their potential links to factors in the environment. Currently, while the United States tracks a number of infectious diseases, there is no comparable system for tracking and preventing chronic diseases and conditions like cancer, asthma and birth defects.

The study, published by a team of researchers from Brigham Young University, New York University School of Medicine, and the University of Ottawa, is the most definitive research to date to document that long-term exposure to air pollution causes an increased risk of lung cancer. The study, which analyzed the health of 500,000 people and cross-checked this information with air pollution data, concluded that people living in the most heavily polluted metropolitan areas have a 12 percent increased risk of dying of lung cancer than people in the least polluted areas. The study's authors said that exposure to tiny particles of soot and sulfates is comparable to the effects of inhaling second-hand smoke from a cigarette.

This clearer link between air pollution and cancer came on the same day that Dr. Shelley Hearne, executive director of TFAH, testified on the need for health tracking before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee's Subcommittee.

"This is an excellent example of why we need nationwide health tracking for the full range of chronic diseases," Hearne said. "If there had been a nationwide health tracking network in place before now, much more would be known about the link between pollution and lung cancer, and we could have taken stronger action to save lives. How many other linkages between disease and environmental factors are we missing because we don't collect this information?"

There have been other studies linking environmental exposures and chronic diseases. A group of California researchers, including scientists at the University of California at Los Angeles, discovered evidence that air pollution might play a role in causing some birth defects. More research is needed in this and other areas.

In her testimony before the Senate committee today, Hearne noted the concern about disease clusters nationwide. She cited several examples where communities do not have enough information on where and when diseases are occurring or their potential links to environmental factors – information that would be available from a health tracking network. In Fallon, Nevada, a community of about 8,000 people, 15 children have been diagnosed with leukemia in the last five years. Residents and health officials suspect contaminated water may be a contributing factor, but without a tracking system in place, the community is powerless to understand the causes and prevent future illness. And in Ohio, at least 25 people have been identified with multiple sclerosis (MS) in Wellington - a town of 4,200. Residents worry about the cause of the illnesses, but don't have enough health information to protect people from getting sick.

More information about the air pollution/lung cancer study can be found on the Web at http://jama.ama-assn.org/. More information about health tracking can be found at TFAH's Web site, *www.healthyamericans.org*.

# # # # #

The Trust for America's Health (TFAH) is a national non-profit organization whose mission is to protect the health and safety of all communities, especially those most at risk of environmental and other public health threats. Its goal is to strengthen the nation's public health system through science-based research, community partnerships, education, and advocacy.