



For Immediate Release
March 21, 2002

Contact:
Amy Goffe, 202-589-0940

Health Groups Endorse New Tracking Bill Introduced in Senate, House

TFAH Unveils Poll Showing Strong Support For Chronic Disease Tracking

Washington, DC – Organizations working to protect the health of families and communities across America today endorsed new legislation to create a Nationwide Health Tracking Network and released a public opinion survey showing strong support for such a proposal.

The legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate and House by Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY) and Harry Reid (D-NV) and by Representatives Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), Pete King (R-NY), Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-OH), and Louise Slaughter (D-NY) would establish a Nationwide Health Tracking Network to track when and where chronic diseases occur, as well as their potential links to environmental factors. Armed with better information, public health officials and communities would be better able to identify causes of chronic disease and help to prevent illnesses before they strike.

The groups endorsing the new proposal include Trust for America's Health (TFAH), the U.S. Public Interest Research Group, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and Mt. Sinai Center for Children's Health and the Environment (CCHE). In total, almost 80 groups support nationwide health tracking (see attached list).

At a news conference today with the members of Congress introducing the legislation, Lois Banks, TFAH's Director of Community Health, said, "Communities across the country dealing with disease clusters have too many questions and not enough answers. They have the right to know what might be making them sick, and health tracking is the way to help. We need this in place for every community."

"We offer world-class medical treatment for people once they are sick, but we do far too little to prevent illness in the first place. One of the keys to better disease prevention is more information, but our public health system lacks adequate tools to track chronic diseases. This health tracking legislation clearly recognizes the need for this kind of health data nationwide," added Banks.

Chronic Diseases the #1 Cause of Death in USA

Chronic diseases including cancer, asthma and birth defects are on the rise and are the number one killers of Americans. About 100 million Americans, or more than one-third of the U.S. population, suffer from some form of chronic disease. The annual cost of chronic disease is estimated at \$325 billion.

A Health Tracking Network for chronic diseases would cost an estimated \$275 million a year – about \$1 for every American – and would be similar to the system this country has in place for infectious diseases, which has helped virtually eradicate polio and other diseases in the United States.

The groups endorsing the bill said it includes many provisions that would be crucial in establishing a Nationwide Health Tracking Network:

- State-based tracking to build a nationwide network of data on priority diseases like asthma, birth defects, cancers, and neurological diseases such as Alzheimer's, Multiple Sclerosis, and Parkinson's disease, as well as environmental exposures like PCBs, dioxin, mercury, lead, pesticides, and water and air contaminants;
- Monitoring of sudden health crises, such as heavy metal and pesticide poisonings, to trigger early action against all types of hazards, whether accidental or intentional;
- Enhancing federal, state, and local rapid response capabilities to investigate clusters, outbreaks, and emerging threats, including those from biological and chemical terrorist attacks;
- Further establishing pilot programs to encourage state, local and regional initiatives to investigate environmental health priorities; and
- Supporting research and training to further advance public health tracking efforts.

New Poll Shows Strong Public Support for Health Tracking

As the senators and representatives were introducing their legislation on Capitol Hill, TFAH unveiled the results of a new public opinion survey that lends additional weight to the case for a Nationwide Health Tracking Network. The telephone survey of 1,000 voters, conducted for TFAH by leading Democratic and Republican polling firms in early March, shows that Americans are almost unanimous (92%) in believing that environmental factors are an important cause of disease. After being made aware that that there is no national network to monitor chronic diseases and environmental health threats, 88% express concern, and 56% are intensely concerned. The same number of voters -- 88% -- support the creation of a Nationwide Health Tracking Network.

"It shocks most people to learn the United States has no national network for monitoring chronic diseases and environmental health risks," Banks said. "It's common sense: If we don't look for that information, we're not going to find it, and opportunities to prevent deadly and debilitating diseases will be missed."

September 11 and the Need for Health Tracking

In a letter to cosponsors of the bill, the endorsing groups said the September 11 attack on New York City offers a case study of the need for health tracking. The environmental contaminants released from the devastation of the World Trade Center will have a lasting impact on the health of emergency responders and on those who live and work in the area. Congress appropriated money in fiscal year 2002 to begin health tracking for emergency responders, but the groups said tracking should be expanded to cover residents and workers in the region. Likewise, the groups said that \$17.5 million provided in FY '02 to begin health tracking pilot programs around the country was an important step. But they said the Health Tracking Network must be established nationwide so that health leaders can seize all opportunities to prevent deadly and debilitating diseases.

* * * * *

For further information, visit the TFAH web site, www.healthyamericans.org; U.S. PIRG's web site, www.pirg.org/envirohealth; CCHE's web site, www.childenvironment.org and PSR's web site: www.psr.org.