

Healthy Environments Across Generations
New York Academy of Medicine, New York City – June 7-8, 2012

Concept Brief

The [Collaborative on Health and the Environment \(CHE\)](#) is partnering with AARP, the U.S. EPA Aging Initiative, The Intergenerational School, The Whole Child Center, the Children’s Environmental Health Center at Mt. Sinai Medical Center, Gray is Green, and WEACTION for Environmental Justice, to organize a conference entitled ***Healthy Environments Across Generations***, to be held in New York City in June 7-8, 2012. This day and a half, interactive event will focus on diverse factors that influence both human and ecological health across the lifespan. These include the many levels of the built, food, chemical, psychosocial, and socioeconomic environments, and the practices and policies that promote or impede health at all ages. The conference venue is the newly renovated [New York Academy of Medicine](#), a beautiful location across from Central Park that will offer us not only programmatic partnership, but help us fulfill our goals to conduct an ecologically-sustainable and multicultural conference serving the needs of all ages and all communities. This conference follows the successful October, 2010 conference *Children First: Promoting Ecological Health for the Whole Child* at UCSF organized by the Whole Child Center, the CHE, and the UCSF Osher Center for Integrative Medicine.

Health as Wholeness

Where and how we live, eat, work, play, and socialize profoundly influence our physical and mental health. Beginning in the womb and continuing throughout life, environmental factors are strong determinants of health decades later. We have scientific evidence confirming that certain early life experiences can influence health later in life. We have a compelling body of research in many areas to show that intergenerational approaches enhance health for all ages. Emerging evidence in new areas such as intergenerational “learning centers” suggests that learning across generations can also lead to better health across the lifespan (e.g., the nationally-recognized Intergenerational School in Cleveland)

A century of change in our food, built, chemical, natural, psychosocial, and socioeconomic environments is fueling dramatic increases in diseases and conditions such as diabetes and obesity. Combined with a near doubling of the over-65 population in the new few decades, this trajectory threatens to overwhelm our health care system, our social resources, and bring widespread economic and social instability.

Consider that the average annual health care cost per person in the U.S is \$5000-6000; having diabetes doubles that cost to \$11,000. Midlife chronic diseases of the “Western disease cluster,” including diabetes, hypertension, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular disease, are themselves risk factors for later life diseases such as Alzheimer’s, one of the many chronic diseases that dramatically affects quality of life for individuals, families, and society. The cost this year of caring for individuals with Alzheimer’s disease alone is estimated at \$180 billion.

Many determinants of chronic disease patterns are linked directly or indirectly to activities that drive climate change and general ecosystem degradation. Human activity has altered virtually every aspect of ecological systems throughout the world in unprecedented ways including climate instability, degraded soil, air, and water quality, and loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services, which collectively increase the risks of a number of diseases or conditions in all people. Economic inequities and disparities in healthcare access put poor, disempowered people at greater risk from both chronic illness and environmental threats.

In this context, we cannot view health as one individual's concern. Nor can we consider health in a single moment or single stage of life. Instead, we have to understand health as a whole system with interacting factors that are in constant feedback loops and cannot be addressed one at a time or at any one stage of life. This means developing innovative, systems-oriented and intergenerational approaches that increase resiliency and reduce disease and disability. These actions will need to include the individual, community, societal and natural environments in which we all live—urban to suburban to rural areas throughout the global North and global South. These efforts will need to make health across the lifespan, including the health of future generations, a priority in any decision-making process. By doing so, we will have the capacity to prevent chronic diseases, promote well-being, and sustain local and global economies.

Most important, we have an ethical responsibility to work across generations, keeping in mind those not yet born, to promote the health of people and the planet.

Intergenerativity: Energizing a Movement

The U.S. is dropping further and further behind other developed countries in terms of important health indicators. Our academic departments are in silos, our educational system is in disarray, and our economic structures don't encourage interventions that promote health and resilience of people and our natural resources. A range of interacting factors—including the built environment, poor nutrition, chemical contaminants and socio-economic concerns--are undermining the health and well-being of current and future generations.

In this context, we see an urgent need to bring together some of the most creative thinkers in science, health, education, nutrition, urban development, ecology and other disciplines to help redesign various systems in our society that are no longer working. This is an opportunity to build on the extraordinary and instrumental movements of the past—Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Human Rights and so forth—to foster a movement that encompasses those values, and at this juncture in history, puts the central spotlight on health for every person on earth and for the planet itself. Our longer-term vision is to catalyze systemic changes in every sector of society and establish new patterns that promote intergenerational and ecological health across the lifespan—what we refer to as “intergenerativity.”

This day and a half, interactive event has, in effect, already started through the discussions we have had with people of all backgrounds and experience over the past few years. In fact, it is because people from different sectors and different ages are calling for an overhaul of the systems in society that contribute the rise in chronic disease and disability, we decided to organize this event.

Prior to the conference, questions and ideas from our content framers and other participants will be posted to prompt creative thinking before we meet. The conference itself will include conversational plenary sessions with leaders in different fields and of different ages to provide substantive content to frame our discussions. To complement these, we will host small, rotating group discussions to discuss specific questions that are thought out well before hand. This will allow all attendees to participate more fully. In addition, music, art, and social media will be interspersed throughout the meeting to emphasize different forms of connection and communication about health across generations.

Most important, we do not see the conference as an end unto itself—nor does it have real walls or boundaries. Instead, it is a stepping stone for building a health-focused, multi-generational movement--one that will allow all of us to cross the tumultuous waters of today's political, economic and social scenes to a future where prevention is the topmost priority and enjoying the healthiest possible life is a right for all, not a privilege for a few.

Overarching Goals:

- Bridge divides between generations, and between and among disciplines and sectors, to catalyze “innovation through integration” towards a new systems-based approach to health.
- Provide scientific evidence about the potential and emerging economic and social consequences of our current, fragmented approach to health, as well as the projected disease burden and ecological degradation expected if we stay on our current trajectory.
- Describe the interconnections between human health and short- and long-term ecological health – including the natural, food, built, chemical, psychosocial and socioeconomic environments.
- Provide successful practical models that reflect an integrated approach and encourage follow up actions by participants to take in their respective communities.
- Provide ample time for participants, in small group discussions, to develop health frameworks that create the conditions for improving intergenerational health and health across the lifespan.
- Create an ongoing network for collaboration that is established during the planning process and carries on after the conference in a variety of ways include innovative technology approaches and social networking. Some specific ideas include: replicating portions of the meeting regionally in partnership with AARP, American Academy of Pediatrics and other institutions to encourage systems thinking on state and local levels; and compiling and disseminating an e-book developed at the conference where participants can continue to add their ideas, success stories, creative initiatives, etc. to build this.

Who Should Attend?

- Medical/health disciplines – pediatricians, family practitioners, nurses, ob/gyns, internists, geriatricians, integrative medicine, midwives, medical anthropologists, nutritionists, dieticians, naturopaths, chiropractors, acupuncturists, massage therapists, health care management, public health practitioners, and others.
- Research scientists including epidemiologists, toxicologists, endocrinologists, climatologists, geneticists, green chemists, etc.
- Community-based leaders working on social and environmental justice
- Social scientists
- Caretakers of young to old
- Health-affected sectors
- School administrators, teachers, social workers
- Health and environment advocates for all age groups
- Culinary specialists - Food preparation, food service, chefs
- Built environment specialists– planners, architects, builders, facilities mgrs, transportation, energy experts
- Natural environment disciplines – horticulturists, conservationists, preservationists, botanists, etc.
- Other integrative health experts (e.g., leaders in the health benefits of meditation, musicology), etc.
- Insurance industry
- Journalists

Why you should attend:

Our intention is to have all participants leave this conference with:

- a basic understanding of cumulative stressors and how they may impact health across the lifespan;
- the significance of intergenerational integration for public health;
- specific examples and interventions that have been successful or are promising and how they apply to and can benefit at least three different professional sectors;
- policy or programmatic recommendations that reinforce promoting health/healthy communities; and
- at least two actions they plan to do differently or initiate in their respective professional worlds and/or communities based on what they have learned during the conference in order to build a multi-faceted movement that makes prevention the foundation for building health communities across the country.
- inspiration to be a part of the vision!

Planning Committee: Elise Miller and Maria Valenti (Collaborative on Health and the Environment-CHE), Kathy Sykes (US EPA Aging Initiative), Dr. Larry Rosen (Whole Child Center), Dr. Peter Whitehouse (Case Western Reserve University, The Intergenerational School), Peggy Shepard (WEACT for Environmental Justice), Kath Shomaker (Gray is Green), Dr. Rick Moody (AARP), Dr. Ted Schettler (Science and Environmental Health Network).