

VITAL SIGNS

Perspectives of the president of APHA

Allegory highlights dual reality of privilege

How understanding of racism can move public health to action

WHEN I WAS a medical student, I had an experience that shaped my understanding of how the world works. I had been studying all day with a group of classmates. Now that evening had fallen, we were keenly aware of our hunger, but there was no food to be found in the apartment. So we set out into town in search of food.

We found a restaurant, went in, sat down, ordered our food, the food was served and we were eating. Not so remarkable a story, you might say. But as we sat there eating, I glanced up and noticed a sign on the door, and that sign was a profound revelation to me about racism.

So what did the sign say? It said “open.”

There I was, sitting at the table of opportunity, eating, with a sign proclaiming “open” to me. And I could have sat there a long time, comfortable and unperturbed. But I knew something about the two-sided nature of those signs. I realized that the restaurant was closed, due to the hour, and that hungry people just a few feet away from me would not be able to walk in, sit down, order their food or eat.

And then I understood that racism structures two-sided signs in our society. Racism creates a dual reality. Those on the inside eating may not even be aware that there is a two-sided sign going on. Indeed, it is difficult for any of us to recognize a system of inequity that privileges us.

It is difficult for men to recognize male privilege and sexism. It is difficult for white people in the United States to recognize white privilege and racism. It is difficult for all Americans to recognize

our U.S. privilege in the global context, except that we got a little taste of it with the recent Ebola epidemic.

But those on the outside are very well aware of the two-sided nature of the sign. It proclaims “closed” to them, but they can look through the window and see people inside eating.

So for those on the inside who are asking, “Is there really a two-sided sign?” or “Does racism really exist?” I acknowledge that it is hard to know when you only see “open.” Indeed, it is part of your privilege not to have to know.

But once you do know, you can choose to act. Acknowledging racism is not a scary thing; it is empowering. And if you care anything about those on the outside, then you can talk to the restaurant owners — who are inside, near you — and encourage them to re-open the restaurant. After all, they will make more money. And, oh, the conversations you can have. Or you can pass food through the door, or break through the glass, or tear down the sign.

But whatever you do, you won't be sitting there saying, “Hmph, I wonder why those people don't just come on in and sit down and eat.” You will understand something about the two-sided sign. And I hope that your understanding will move you to action. Email me. ■

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APHA: Mixed bag on omnibus spending bill

THE 2016 spending bill approved by Congress in December offers some benefits for public health, but also disappointments, according to APHA.

The bill, a year-end agreement that funds the government through September and provides “modest increases” of \$278 million for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and \$34.8 million for the Health Resources and Services Administration, was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama on Dec. 18.

In a Dec. 17 statement, APHA lauded the bill for bolstering programs ranging from CDC's antibiotic resistance research to prescription drug overdose prevention and treatment, as well as providing new resources for the Food and Drug Administration to implement the Food Safety Modernization Act.

However, the Association noted its disappointment that the bill did not eliminate language that restricts CDC from doing research on gun violence.

“Public health remains woefully underfunded,” said Georges Benjamin, MD, executive director of APHA. “Until we fully eliminate sequestration, we will not be able to adequately fund all of the important public health programs that will help ensure we become the healthiest nation in one generation.”

Throughout the legislative session, APHA has given its support to measures that would increase public health funding and research. In a Nov. 16 letter, APHA led the CDC Coalition in calling for the highest possible level of funding for CDC in the fiscal year. The same day, APHA led the Friends of HRSA to call for the agency to be funded at the highest possible level, as well. And on Nov. 17, APHA called on House leaders and Shaun Donovan, JD, director of the Office of Management and Budget, to provide funding for the Medical Reserve Corps in 2016 and 2017. ■

— Lindsey Wahowiak

National Public Health Week preparations gearing up now

AS APRIL, and National Public Health Week, draws closer, excitement is growing and preparations are being made for the annual celebration of public health.

National Public Health Week, held April 4-10 this year, has been organized by APHA for nearly 20 years, bringing together public health practitioners, advocates, students and the public to recognize the contributions of public health and highlight the issues that are important to improving the nation's health. The week's events are an opportunity to raise awareness and educate communities about the importance of public health.

This year, National Public Health Week preparations focus around APHA's Generation Public Health campaign, a movement to get people of all ages involved in making the United States the healthiest nation. Though it spends the most on health care, by many measures, the U.S. is not the healthiest nation in many regards, including life expectancy. The theme “Healthiest Nation 2030” encourages all NPHW participants to help build the U.S. into the healthiest nation in one generation.

In a new twist this year, daily themes will not be announced in advance of NPHW. Rather, daily themes will be revealed each day of the week, with action items and tools to help public health advocates engage with cross-sector partners to get them involved in Generation Public Health, said Kimberly Moore Smith, MHSA, director of Affiliate Affairs at APHA.

“We're really using National Public Health Week as an opportunity to

get folks more engaged in Generation Public Health, to expand on it and educate people about how important public health really is,” Moore Smith told *The Nation's Health*. “Public health advocates have known for a long time that things like where you live, who you are and your access to health care can have a real impact on how healthy you are. But for those outside our usual partners, it may be a shock. That's why we're working to engage with non-traditional partners to make those connections and build a greater network for public health.”

Looking at the business sector, nonprofit organizations not traditionally focused on health and media outlets are just the beginning for this year's NPHW festivities. The week will also bring back favorite events, including the annual National Public Health Week Twitter chat. Scheduled for 2 p.m. EDT on Wednesday, April 6, @NPHW will lead an online discussion of what it means to be part of Generation Public Health. To RSVP for the Twitter chat, visit <http://vite.io/NPHWchat>.

Public health advocates are also encouraged to take the Generation Public Health pledge as part of their NPHW celebration. The pledge is online now at www.apha.org/2030.

As always, schools of public health, health departments and other groups will hold local NPHW events across the country. To add an event to the NPHW calendar or for tools to help plan an event, visit www.nphw.org. The site will be updated throughout National Public Health Week. ■

— Lindsey Wahowiak



**National
Public Health
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