

The border region poses particular challenges to the U.S. health care system: It is one of the fastest growing in the nation, has the highest percentage of Hispanics, comprises twenty-six Native American tribes, and is a young population. Meeting these challenges requires interdependence among various levels of governments and the private sector to address multiple health status issues. Thus, the border health care burden offers an opportunity to bridge the needs of people with innovative solutions, bring together multiple levels of government and leaders across geographic and jurisdictional borders, improve the public health infrastructure, create a culture of wellness and prevention, grow the nation's health care workforce, and replicate border public health and prevention models.

## Challenges

Some of the specific challenges to border communities include the following:

- *Rapidly growing, young, and Hispanic population*  
Since 2003, the population of the southwest border counties increased by 29.3 percent. According to 2008 estimates, persons under age 19 comprised 31 percent of the population in border counties. In addition, 52 percent of the population in the border region were Hispanic.
- *Lower educational attainment*  
As of 2000, if the border counties were a state, it would rank last in the nation in percent of population at age 25 or above who completed high school (excluding San Diego County).
- *Lower income status*  
In 2007, the annual per capita income in the border counties (\$26,842) was only about two-thirds the level in the border states (\$39,013) and the overall U.S. population (\$38,839).
- *Higher poverty rates*  
Poverty is almost twice as high in the border region (25%) compared to the United States (13%).
- *Higher rates of uninsured*  
Border region residents lead the nation in lacking health coverage: 23 percent of border residents lack health insurance coverage compared to 14.7 percent nationally.
- *Inadequate number of health care providers*  
Physicians per 10,000 population for all border counties is 16.3 compared to 23.3 percent for the border states as a whole, 26.2 for non-border counties in the border states, and 26.1 for the United States as a whole.

## Opportunities

Despite these challenges, the border region can serve as a model for implementing innovative solutions. Some of these opportunities include the following:

- *Improve access to health care on the border.*  
The history of border leadership, collaboration, and cooperation provides a strong foundation for developing creative solutions for reducing the high uninsurance rates among border communities, especially among children and Hispanics.
- *Strengthen the public health infrastructure and create a culture of wellness and prevention.*  
Public health and prevention are the cornerstones of healthy communities. Shifting the focus of the healthcare system from the treatment of diseases to health promotion and prevention is the key to good health. Improvements in the border public health infrastructure, as well as the institutional and human resource capacities, are necessary to prevent communicable diseases and eliminate health disparities.
- *Promote evidence-based interventions and models of excellence.*  
Drawing on lessons learned and evidence of best practices in improving access to health care can improve access to health care for diverse communities in the United States. For example, practical approaches such as the use of community health workers or *promotoras* as patient navigators who ensure access to and optimal patient utilization of health services have been utilized and proven to be effective along the border.

Improving access to health care on the border, creating a culture of wellness and prevention, and promoting evidence-based interventions and models of excellence can ensure deliberate and sustained actions to improve health conditions in the border region and can serve to elevate the health of the nation.