



Detroit One of Only Two Cities Chosen to Participate in African American Mental Health Conference via Satellite

October 3rd event aims to educate and engage policy makers to improve mental health care

Detroit, MI – September 29, 2008 – The National Black Caucus of State Legislators today announced it will host its 15th Annual Mental Health Conference to address the more pertinent mental health issues on both state and federal levels facing us today. The goal of the conference is to educate state legislators, healthcare professionals, community leaders and the public about mental illness and what can be done to reduce the cultural stigmas and barriers that prevent access in the African American community.

This year's conference will be a first for NBCSL, as the event will broadcast live from Indianapolis via satellite to Miami, Fla., and Detroit, Mich. The conference theme, "Black America's Dialogue on Mental Health," will allow open dialogue between the conference participants and attendees in the three cities. In addition, the conference will be available live through the Internet, allowing the public to listen in on the conference at www.nbcsl.org.

"Together, we can provide better treatment for mental illness in Michigan's African American community," said Senator Hansen Clarke (D-Detroit), Vice Chair of the Michigan State Senate's Health Policy Committee. "We need to identify the barriers to improving mental health care and then take action to break them down. I am calling community leaders to take advantage of this unique opportunity by participating in the conference. We owe it to our community."

"We are experiencing a mental health crisis in the African American community today," said Georgia State Representative Calvin Smyre, NBCSL President. "The cultural barriers and stigmas associated with mental illness in the African American community make it an even more difficult illness to overcome. We will continue to fail our community until we rise to the challenge and start providing solutions. We need our leadership to first gain an understanding of these issues and then become a voice for those affected."

Rep. Smyre added, "One of our conference topics will cover African American mental health in the military. As our troops come home from Iraq and Afghanistan over the next several years, we need to dedicate significant attention to helping them readjust to civilian life. Our conference panel discussion will equip us to better handle this issue and help our veterans."

Speakers and panel discussions will be held throughout the day on Friday. U.S. Congressman Kendrick Meek (FL), U.S. Congresswoman Carolyn Kilpatrick (MI) and U.S. Congressman Andre Carson (IN) will be speaking at the luncheon presentation to offer a federal perspective. Topics for this year's event include "Mental Health and African Americans in the Military," "Barriers and Cultural Stigmas," and "The Black Family."

For the past fifteen years, the mental health conference has been supported through a generous grant by Eli Lilly and Company.

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The stigma of mental illness is so powerful in the black community that many refuse to admit a problem or even seek the opinion of a medical professional. Many are forced to hide behind the problems of mental illness without seeking help for fear of labels or lack of support by family.

Insufficient access to appropriate mental healthcare, mistrust of medical health professionals, and the misdiagnoses of illnesses top the list of additional factors that complicate overcoming mental illness.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nearly 25 percent of African Americans are uninsured, compared to 16 percent of the overall U.S. population. Rates of employer-based health coverage are just over 50 percent for employed African Americans, compared to over 70 percent for employed non-Hispanic whites. Medicaid covers nearly 21 percent of African Americans.

Culture biases against mental health and healthcare professionals prevent many African Americans from accessing care due to prior experiences with historical misdiagnoses, inadequate treatment, and a lack of cultural understanding. According to NAMI only 2 percent of psychiatrists, 2 percent of psychologists, and 4 percent of social workers in the United States are African Americans.

In addition, when seeking help, instead of turning to mental health specialists, African Americans are more likely to visit emergency services or a primary care provider. This leads to under-diagnoses or misdiagnoses.

To register for the conference or to learn more, please e-mail mentalhealth@nbcsl.org.

About the National Black Caucus of State Legislators

The National Black Caucus of State Legislators (NBCSL) is a membership association representing more than 600 African American state legislators hailing from 42 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. NBCSL members represent more than 50 million Americans of various racial backgrounds. NBCSL monitors federal and state activity and provides this information to its members through policy symposiums and conferences. Each year, NBCSL members pass policy resolutions that directly impact federal and state policy. The organization focuses on issues that directly impact U.S. domestic policy and is committed to policies that positively affect all Americans. See NBCSL on the web at www.nbcsl.org.

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