

# Highmark Creates Multi-dimensional Approach to Address Health Care Disparities

In 2002, the Institute Of Medicine (IOM) published “Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care,” a report that concluded racial and ethnic minorities receive lower-quality health care than whites even when they are of similar age, at a similar income level and have the same access to health coverage and care.

Although the quality of health care is poor for many Americans, specific racial and ethnic groups continue to experience worse quality of care than their white counterparts. Evidence of these disparities in treatment is strongest for African-Americans and Hispanics in the U.S., but is also growing among Native Americans.

Highmark Blue Shield has formed a multi-dimensional approach to focus on health care disparities, and has been addressing this issue for more than five years through many activities, including data collection, focused interventions by its Integrated Clinical Services division, programs by its Community Affairs division, Highmark Foundation programs aimed at improving community health, and national initiatives that are designed to reduce disparities and improve the quality of care for all.

## A Comprehensive Strategy

“With strong support from senior management, Highmark is taking a comprehensive approach to address health care disparities,” said Rhonda Moore Johnson, M.D., medical director of Integrated Clinical Services at Highmark. “Highmark takes its obligation seriously. We know we have opportunities to close some gaps in health care quality among our racial and minority group members. Our comprehensive strategy includes working with our providers, our health care systems, our members and our communities to improve health care quality and access. We want all of our members to live longer, healthier lives.”

There are many possible reasons for these disparities, including access to high-quality care; cultural and language barriers; health literacy barriers; limited cultural competence of providers and health care organizations; biases; prejudices and stereotypes that may affect the way providers render care; and lack of trust by minority patients for the health care establishment.

## Highmark Invests in Reducing Health Disparities

In 2006, Highmark formed a multi-disciplinary committee that oversees programs and practices that address the needs of an increasingly diverse population and marketplace.

Cultural competency training was completed by all Highmark medical directors and more than 1,000 Highmark clinical staff and customer service representatives. Also, nearly all of Highmark’s 19,000 employees receive diversity and inclusion training on an ongoing basis.



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## Health Care Disparities

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Through significant grant making, Highmark supports a number of outreach programs and local organizations throughout Pennsylvania, including the Children's Sickle Cell Foundation in Pittsburgh, the Latino Leadership Alliance of the Lehigh Valley and the Pennsylvania Immigrant & Refugee Women's Network. Highmark has also created special educational events: Partners for a Healthy Community, daylong events that offer free health screenings; and Fun, Fit and Fabulous! conferences for women and teens of color.

The Highmark Foundation, a charitable organization and private foundation funded solely by Highmark Inc., provided funding to the Capital Region Health System at Hamilton Health Center for their Healthy Outcomes program for diabetic patients and to Washington County Health Partners (WCHP) to help launch the Health Ministry Initiative, which is a program to identify and address the health issues of African-Americans in Washington County. The foundation has also provided several grants for dental and oral health programs across the state.

Information on Highmark preventive health support programs and other resources, as well as reminders for colorectal cancer screening, were mailed to thousands of minority members. Another initiative resulted in a 14 percent increase in flu vaccination rates among Highmark's African-American members from 2005 to 2006. Highmark continues to work with members to obtain self-identified race, ethnicity and language preference data through voluntary, confidential questionnaires and telephone outreach. To date, Highmark has received a 30 percent response rate.

Through Blues On Call<sup>SM</sup>, the 24/7 health information and decision support telephone and online service, Highmark addresses health disparities with customized outreach materials. Highmark's membership is segmented so that individuals receive direct mail with targeted messages based on clinical

needs and socio-demographic variables such as age, geographic location, socio-economic status, literacy and race/ethnicity.

Highmark has worked with the SilverSneakers<sup>®</sup> program to improve access to fitness facilities for our Medicare members by adding three additional centers in Pittsburgh's East Liberty, Wilkinsburg and Hill District neighborhoods.

Highmark has been engaging practicing physicians through newsletters, focused discussion groups, quality management physician subcommittees and focused educational interventions. An external advisory panel was created in 2007 that includes physicians and local and national experts to provide guidance and recommendations to improve quality health care.

Highmark is one of 11 national health plans participating in the

"National Health Plan Collaborative to Reduce Disparities and Improve Quality," funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Federal Agency for Health Care Research and Quality.

"Reducing health care disparities is important to Highmark as well as a key focus of the federal government and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' *Healthy People 2010* disease prevention and health promotion objectives," said Johnson. "Highmark will continue to take an active role in reducing racial and ethnic health care disparities. Developing and implementing strategies to reduce or eliminate disparities will require Highmark to develop more effective communication tools and strategies to interact with a diverse pool of members." ■

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comprehensive strategy  
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