



**STATEMENT OF DR. JOSEPH LYOU,
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**ON THE
REPORT OF THE SB 702 EXPERT WORKING GROUP ON
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH TRACKING**

FEBRUARY 24, 2004

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The creation of an environmental health tracking system in California will benefit those who need it the most – those living in our most contaminated neighborhoods and those suffering from chronic diseases such as asthma, lead poisoning, heart disease, and cancer.

As a member of the SB 702 Expert Working Group, I am very encouraged. I am encouraged by the breadth and strength of our report; I am encouraged by the leadership and support of Senator Martha Escutia in making this report possible; and I am encouraged by the commitment to address environmental health problems, a commitment commonly shared among work group members, and the community representatives and agency officials we heard from at our public meetings.

I am here today to discuss our findings and recommendations that relate to the needs of community members. It is important to acknowledge how we reached these findings and recommendations. A key part of our deliberative process involved hearing directly from impacted community members. People like Kristin Aldana-Taday of Pacoima Beautiful, and Linda Kite of the Healthy Homes Collaborative, and Dee Lewis of the Concerned Residents Initiative, came to our meetings and explained in great detail the trials and tribulations of their community-based environmental health and environmental health tracking efforts. Our Expert Working Group learned a great deal from these presentations, and we made every effort to incorporate what we learned into our findings and recommendations.

My comments today reflect issues addressed in Chapters 6 and 8 of our report. In Chapter 6, we discuss community and stakeholder contributions and needs. In Chapter 8, we identify our priority findings and recommendations. Please refer to these chapters for a more thorough understanding of the issues I will touch upon in my comments.

I will focus upon four issues: (1) access to information; (2) community information needs; (3) environmental justice; and (4) responding to community concerns.

Access to Information

With regard to information access, the Expert Working Group recommends that access to environmental health tracking data be limited only to the extent necessary to protect confidentiality. Community members have a right to know about environmental hazards, exposures, and diseases. Data must be provided in a timely manner. Linda Kite of the Healthy Homes Collaborative in Los Angeles demonstrated the need for complete and timely access to data. Her organization provides lead abatement services to low-income communities of color. Her limited access to data on the location of lead-poisoned children, and delays of up to 6 months in getting what data are available, have seriously hampered her efforts. As a result, she believes children are needlessly exposed to lead and needlessly suffer the adverse neurological and developmental impacts of lead exposure.

Data access costs should not prohibit community members from learning about environmental health tracking issues in their neighborhoods. For example, Meena Palaniappan of the Pacific Institute told us of having to pay \$1,000 for discharge data on children hospitalized with asthma in West Oakland, which she needed for a community-based research project.

Community Information Needs

As to community information needs, a common theme emerged among those community presenters we heard from at our meetings: Community members need information that is scientifically valid and personally relevant. This means that the data they seek must be accurate,

and it must address local concerns. Using the work of the Pacific Institute again as an example, when they worked with community members on the development of the West Oakland Environmental Indicators Project, they discovered that agency officials lacked data on the local impacts of diesel trucks. This lack of data represented a disturbing information gap. Other information gaps, such as the lack of community-level data about the environmentally-related chronic diseases, must also be addressed.

I would also like to add that our general lack of information about environmental hazards severely hampers community efforts to address environmental health tracking issues. In our report, we cite to findings showing that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency lacks basic toxicity data for 43% of the 3,000 high-production chemicals in the United States. (High-production chemicals are those imported or produced in quantities of more than 1 million pounds per year.) We also cite to a U.S. General Accounting Office report that concludes that national exposure surveys monitor for only 6% of 1,400 common and potentially hazardous chemicals in the United States. Without data on chemical toxicity and exposures, community members have no chance of addressing their environmental health concerns.

Environmental Justice

Onto environmental justice. Environmental hazards are not uniformly distributed in California. When compared with others, communities of color and low-income neighborhoods tend to confront the most and the worst environmental hazards. This has been the experience of Kristin Aldana-Taday of Pacoima Beautiful, who works in the northeast section of the San Fernando Valley, an area surrounded by freeways, a railroad, an airport, abandoned trash, oil drums, hazardous waste sites, and land-use conflicts. The Expert Working Group recommends that California track the relationships between race, ethnicity, and income, and environmental hazards, exposures, diseases, and treatment programs. We also endorse the recommendations of the Cal/EPA Advisory Committee on Environmental Justice; in particular, the recommendations of the Advisory Committee on public participation and research needs.

Responding to Community Concerns

Which brings me to the issue of responding to community concerns. We heard from Dee Lewis of the Concerned Residents Initiative about the anxiety and frustration facing community members dealing with possible disease clusters in their neighborhoods. We concluded that, in addition to the research and data needs associated with environmental health tracking, it will be vital that the new program include an intensive, long-term, and consistent commitment to community outreach and education. Community members must understand the strengths and limitations of attempts to link environmental hazards to disease outcomes. They need technical assistance and they deserve a consistent, honest response when they raise concerns about environmental health tracking issues. We recommend the establishment of protocols for when and how disease cluster investigations should take place, and the development of a uniform set of guidelines for state and county health authorities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I will sum up my comments by saying that health tracking can provide helpful information to community members, and community members can provide useful information for health tracking; public health officials must monitor and address environmental justice concerns; California needs a commitment to community outreach and education; and we recommend the establishment of protocols for when and how disease cluster investigations take place. Thank you.

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The California Environmental Rights Alliance is a public interest group dedicated to achieving environmental health and justice in California by improving the quality of environmental decisions and through the empowerment of communities. Dr. Lyou can be reached at (310) 536-8237 (office) or jlyou@EnviroRights.org.