

# NATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS



## Raising Awareness, Sparking Action: RHEC III Holds First National Health Equity Day

On April 5, 2016, the Mid-Atlantic Regional Health Equity Council (RHEC) launched the first national **Health Equity Day**, an inclusive initiative recognizing and reflecting on the need to achieve health equity in the United States. The Health Equity Day was created to raise awareness about health disparities in the U.S., and about the social determinants that create these disparities. The goal is to achieve health equity.

Health Equity Day is one of the Mid-Atlantic RHEC's responses to the alarming facts uncovered by the council's 2015 **Regional Blueprint for Action**. The report on the region, which includes Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and the District of Columbia, found that:

- The District of Columbia had the lowest high school graduation rate in the nation, at 59 percent;
- Life expectancy rates are lower, on average, among African-Americans than other populations in Virginia;
- West Virginia ranked highest in the nation in food insecurity; and

- Urban populations in Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland and the District of Columbia were among the least healthy in the nation.

“What was most profound about the report was the connection between the persistence of health disparities and disparities in education, housing, food security and other social determinants of health,” said Deidra Lemons Johnson, MPA, Senior Advisor of Operations, Strategy and Analytics at AARP, former co-chair of the Mid-Atlantic RHEC and current council member. “We felt it was fitting to spread awareness during April’s National Minority Health Month,” she noted.

“Health Equity Day is intended to raise awareness about health disparities in the U.S. and the role that social determinants of health play, with the goal of promoting health equity,” said Lemons Johnson. Sharp disparities in health and health care are not just an issue in the Mid-Atlantic; they are a significant challenge nationally, with racial and ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, residents of rural areas and other vulnerable groups more likely to suffer from disease, and even die up to 20 years earlier, than other Americans.

In launching the first Health Equity Day, the Mid-Atlantic RHEC laid a foundation for

other RHECs, organizations and individuals to join in, to recognize and promote Health Equity Day going forward, particularly beyond the Mid-Atlantic region. In the initial Health Equity Day commemoration, RHEC III created a social media campaign, using Facebook and Twitter to raise awareness about health disparities and the need for health equity. It created several hashtags for the day – #HealthEquityDay, #Im4Equity and #HealthEquityPledge – and created a **Health Equity Day Pledge** that people can take.

The Council also encouraged people to attend a health equity event during National Minority Health Month, and address health disparities in partnership with other organizations and stakeholders in their community. In the end, the RHEC saw a total of 383 visits to the Health Equity Day webpage, of which 258 went to the Health Equity Day Pledge site. The Council intends to build on the initial momentum and will engage other RHECs and organizations in the 2017 Health Equity Day effort. This could include hosting an event and encouraging others, nationwide, to join forces with stakeholders at the local, state and national levels to raise awareness of health disparities and call on all citizens to end them, through concerted action, and by building strategic alliances and partnerships across the nation.