

Health news at the national and federal levels

Cities becoming deadlier for pedestrians

Road safety problems a public health epidemic, reports say

PEDESTRIAN and automobile safety continue to be major public health concerns, as several new reports show wide disparities in states' highway safety laws, continued increases in pedestrian deaths and a growing problem with alcohol-related fatal crashes.

APHA participated in a December news conference highlighting "Mean Streets 2004," a November study from the Surface Transportation Policy Project that revealed walking remains the most dangerous mode of transportation. The study was released in conjunction with APHA, AARP, Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the American Planning Association and American Society of Landscape Architects as well as prominent local and state policymakers and transportation advocates.

The study found that in 2003, 11.3 percent of all traffic fatalities were pedestrians. Almost 5,000 Americans were hit while crossing the street, walking to work or school or participating in other pedestrian-related activities. Black and Hispanic pedestrians have a

fatality rate well above the national average, according to the report, and more than half of the nation's 50 largest metropolitan areas grew more deadly for pedestrians. This was despite the fact that pedestrian fatalities have declined overall in the past 10 years and walking is becoming a less and less popular mode of transportation.

"This study is an important wake-up call that documents the preventable suffering that those of us who have worked in emergency departments have seen individually," said APHA Executive Director Georges Benjamin, MD, FACP, who also is a board member of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. "Pedestrian deaths are traumatic and, in too many circumstances, avoidable tragedies. By making walking and biking safe, we not only improve transportation options but the exercise can also improve our health."

Benjamin was also on hand for the release of the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety's second annual highway safety report in mid-December. The "2005 Roadmap to State Highway Safety Laws — Roadwork Ahead, the Unfinished Safety Agenda" rates each state and the District of Columbia on the adoption of 14 basic highway safety laws. No state has adopted all 14 laws, which include primary seat belt enforcement, motorcycle helmet laws and booster seat laws for children younger than age 4.



Photo courtesy Getty Images

Making walking and biking to school safer would not only help reduce traffic-related pedestrian deaths, but also provide an opportunity for exercise, according to a recent report.

"In 2004, we saw little improvement made among the states in adopting highway safety laws that reduce the number of deaths and injuries," said Judie Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. "Only one state adopted a primary enforcement seat belt law this year. At this rate, it will be 2033 before every state protects their citizens with an effective seat belt law."

Equally disturbing, Stone said, are teen death rates on the road and the lack of laws designed to protect young drivers.

"As a former emergency department physician, I have witnessed first-hand the emotional toll of vehicle crashes on individuals and families," Benjamin said.

A new physician-led traffic safety advocacy group also held a December news conference to announce the 15 deadliest states in the country for impaired driving. The group, End Needless Death on Our Roadways, called on the governors of the "Fatal 15" and the mayor of Washington, D.C., to create task forces dedicated to exploring new strategies for addressing impaired drivers and other dangerous driving behavior. They also said physicians and other health care providers can help stop the cycle of drinking and driving by screening patients for alcohol-use problems and providing referrals for counseling and other care. At least 44 percent of all traffic fatalities in the 15 states are alcohol-related, according to statistics from the U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The 15 states are Connecticut, Hawaii, Illinois, Kansas, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and Wisconsin.

"Mean Streets 2004" is available from <www.transact.org>. The "2005 Roadmap to Highway Safety Laws" is at <www.saferoads.org>. The Coalition to End Needless Death on Our Roadways plans to post its "Fatal 15" report at <www.endneedlessdeath.org>. ■

— Donya C. Arias

Leavitt nominated to lead health and human services

US. Environmental Protection Agency Director Michael Leavitt is President Bush's choice to take over Tommy Thompson's post as head of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Bush tapped Leavitt, a former Utah governor who has led EPA since November 2003, on Dec. 13.

Thompson announced his resignation will take effect Feb. 4 or once a successor can be confirmed. APHA issued statements thanking Thompson for his service and urging Leavitt to lead HHS with the strength needed to address many national public health issues.

"We urge the next HHS secretary to face a variety of national health-related challenges, including rising prescription drug costs, the increase in uninsured Americans and health disparities," said APHA Executive Director Georges C. Benjamin, MD, FACP, on the day Bush announced Leavitt's nomination. "We must continue to strengthen our public health infrastructure as state health departments and agencies across the country experience work force shortages. Our nation's federal programs should reflect the dedication to ensuring that individuals and families receive the health care they deserve."

At press time, Leavitt's congressional hearings were scheduled for mid-January. There were concerns, however, that Leavitt's confirmation could be blocked by senators trying to force a vote on prescription drug reimportation.

In a White House news conference announcing Leavitt's nomination, Bush said the EPA administrator had led that agency "with

skill and with a focus on results."

"He is an ideal choice to lead one of the largest departments of the U.S. government," Bush said about HHS, which has a \$548 billion yearly budget, more than 66,000 workers and oversees more than 300 federal programs and agencies such as Medicare, Medicaid and the U.S.

Food and Drug Administration. "From the safety of our food and medicine, to the Medicare program, to preparing for any kind of health emergency, HHS has comprehensive responsibilities for the health of Americans. To meet those responsibilities, the department needs many thousands of skilled professionals and a leader who is able to act on many fronts at once."

Bush pointed out that one of Leavitt's HHS duties would be overseeing the new Medicare prescription drug program in 2006. Other priority areas mentioned by Bush and Leavitt during the December news conference were medical liability reform and reducing health care costs.

Thompson said he was pleased with Bush's choice, calling Leavitt "a strong, common-sense leader who knows how to deliver results. He will make a terrific secretary of health and human services."

Leavitt served three terms as Utah governor before being named EPA administrator.

"The Department of Health and Human Services plays a vital part of the lives of every American," Leavitt said. "I'm persuaded that we can use technology and innovation to meet our most noble aspirations and not compromise our other values that we hold so dear." ■



Photo by Brendan Smialowski, courtesy Getty Images

Mike Leavitt, left, speaks to reporters in December after President Bush nominated him to serve as the new HHS secretary.