

Speaker's Biographies

Health Equity: Focusing on Health In All Policies – February 25, 2009

Congresswoman Donna M. Christensen

Delegate from the United States Virgin Islands
House of Representatives

The Honorable Donna M. Christensen is serving her seventh term as the Delegate from the United States Virgin Islands. She is the first female physician in the history of the U.S. Congress, the first woman to represent an offshore Territory, and the first woman Delegate from the United States Virgin Islands. She serves as an Assistant Majority Whip.

In the 111th Congress, Delegate Christensen serves on the following House Committees, Subcommittees and Caucuses: the House Energy and Commerce Committee (the first non-voting delegate to be named to the committee) and its Subcommittees on Health, Telecommunications and the Internet, and Oversight and Investigations; the Committee on Natural Resources and its Subcommittees on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife, and National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

Delegate Christensen is the Second Vice-chair of the Congressional Black Caucus and chairs the Congressional Black Caucus' Health Braintrust, which oversees and advocates minority health issues nationally and internationally. She is a Member of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues; Member of the Steering Committee of the Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus; Member of the Congressional Rural Caucus; Member of the Friends of the Caribbean Caucus; Member of the Coastal Caucus; Member of the Congressional Fire Caucus and additionally, a Member of the Congressional National Guard and Reserve Caucus.

She was born in 1945 to the late Judge Almeric Christian and Virginia Sterling Christian. She earned a Bachelor of Science in 1966 at St. Mary's College in Notre Dame, Indiana. She earned an M.D. (Doctor of Medicine) in 1970 from George Washington University School of Medicine in Washington, D.C. She interned at Pacific Medical Center in San Francisco, California from 1970 to 1971 and did her residency in family medicine at Howard University Medical Center from 1973 to 1974. She became a board certified physician in 1977.

Christensen began her medical career in the Virgin Islands in 1975 as an emergency room physician. She served as staff physician at the Maternal & Child Health program, Medical Director of the Nesbitt Clinic in Frederiksted, Director of the Frederiksted Health Center, Director of Maternal and Child Health and Family Planning, served as the Medical Director of the St. Croix Hospital and rounded out her medical career as the Territorial Assistant Commissioner of Health and as the Acting Commissioner of Health. She maintained a private practice in family medicine from 1975 until her election to Congress in 1996.

As a registered member of the Democratic Party of the Virgin Islands, she has served as Democratic National Committeewoman, member of the Democratic Territorial Committee, Delegate to Democratic Conventions from 1984 to present, Member, Platform Committee of the Democratic National Committee from 1988 to present. She was elected to the Virgin Islands Board of Education from 1984 to 1986 and was appointed as a member to the Virgin Islands Status Commission from 1988 to 1992.

Brian D. Smedley, Ph.D.

Vice President & Director

Health Policy Institute

Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

Brian D. Smedley is Vice President and Director of the Health Policy Institute of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies in Washington, DC. In this position, Dr. Smedley oversees all of the operations of the Institute, which was started in 2002 with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The Institute has a dual focus: to explore disparities in health and to generate policy recommendations on longstanding health equity concerns.

Formerly, Smedley was Research Director and co-founder of the communications, research and policy organization, of the Opportunity Agenda (www.opportunityagenda.org). In this position, he led the organization's effort to center equity in state and national health reform discussions and to build the national will to expand opportunity for all. To that end, Smedley is a co-editor, along with Alan Jenkins, of a book, All Things Being Equal: Instigating Opportunity in an Inequitable Time.

Prior to helping launch The Opportunity Agenda, Smedley was a Senior Program Officer in the Division of Health Sciences Policy of the Institute of Medicine (IOM), where he served as Study Director for the IOM reports, In the Nation's Compelling Interest: Ensuring Diversity in the Health Care Workforce and Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care, among other reports on diversity in the health professions and minority health research policy. Smedley came to the IOM from the American Psychological Association, where he worked on a wide range of social, health, and education policy topics in his capacity as Director for Public Interest Policy. Prior to working at the APA, Smedley served as a Congressional Science Fellow in the office of Rep. Robert C. Scott (D-VA). His fellowship was sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

In 2004, Smedley was honored by the Rainbow/PUSH coalition as a "Health Trailblazer" award winner. Other awards and distinctions include the 2002 Congressional Black Caucus "Healthcare Hero" award and the 2002 Early Career Award for Distinguished Contributions to Psychology in the Public Interest by the APA. Smedley holds an undergraduate degree from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in psychology from UCLA.

David R. Williams, Ph.D.

Florence & Laura Norman Professor of Public Health
Harvard School of Public Health and Staff Director
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America

Dr. David R. Williams is the Florence and Laura Norman Professor of Public Health at the Harvard School of Public Health and Professor of African and African American Studies and of Sociology at Harvard University. His prior academic appointments were at Yale University and the University of Michigan. He holds master's degree in public health from Loma Linda University and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Michigan.

He is an internationally recognized authority on social influences on health. His research has focused on trends and determinants of socioeconomic and racial disparities in health, the effects of racism on health and the ways in which religious involvement can affect health. He is the author of more than 180 scientific papers and his research has appeared in leading journals in sociology, psychology, medicine, public health and epidemiology. He has served as a member of the editorial board of 11 scientific journals and as a reviewer for more than 50 others. According to ISI Essential Science Indicators, he was one of the Top 10 Most Cited Researchers in the Social Sciences during the decade 1995 to 2005. The Journal of Black Issues in Higher Education, ranked him as the 2nd Most Cited Black Scholar in the Social Sciences in 2006 and in 2007. In 2001, he was elected as a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. In 2004, he received one of the inaugural Decade of Behavior Research Awards and in 2007; he was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Dr. Williams has served on the Department of Health and Human Services' National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics and on seven panels for the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences. He has held elected and appointed positions in professional organizations, such as the American Sociological Association and the Academy Health and the American Public Health Association. Currently, he is a member of the of the MacArthur Foundation's Research Network on Socioeconomic Status and Health and the staff director of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission is a national, independent and nonpartisan health commission focused on evidence-based, non-medical strategies that can improve the health of all Americans and reduce social gaps in health.

Dr. Williams has appeared on national television including ABC's Evening News, CNN, PBS, C-SPAN and the Discovery Channel. His research has been featured or he has been quoted in the national print media including the New York Times, Time Magazine, Newsweek, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post, Jet and USA Today.

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Society
Human Development and Health
Harvard School of Public Health

Dolores Acevedo-Garcia has a doctoral degree in public policy and demography (Princeton University, 1996). She is an Associate Professor in the Department of Society, Human Development and Health at the Harvard School of Public Health. During academic year 2008-2009, she is a Martin Luther King Visiting Associate Professor at MIT in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning.

Her research focuses on the effect of social determinants (e.g. residential segregation, immigrant adaptation) on health disparities along racial and ethnic lines; the role of non-health policies (e.g. housing policies, immigrant policies) in reducing those disparities; and the health and well-being of children with special needs and their families. Currently, Dr. Acevedo-Garcia is on two national expert panels convened by the Centers for Disease Control, one on housing and health, and another one on social determinants of health. She serves on the expert panel for the PBS documentary series *Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making us Sick?* Her recent professional activities also include her invited testimony to the National Commission on Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity chaired by former HUD Secretaries Cisneros and Kemp.

Dr. Acevedo-Garcia is Project Director for DiversityData (<http://diversitydata.sph.harvard.edu>), an extensive database on socioeconomic indicators of racial/ethnic equity in U.S. metropolitan areas, which can be accessed through a user-friendly web application. DiversityData publishes reports and scholarly work featuring data analyses, and presents findings and their policy implications to academic and policy advocacy groups. DiversityData is an ongoing project of the Harvard School of Public Health and The Center for the Advancement of Health, supported by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In the next two years, DiversityData will be expanded and enhanced to make it a more comprehensive and useful data-driven tool for people working towards improving the lives of vulnerable children, and racial/ethnic equity among children; to incorporate information on policies that may help improve the lives of vulnerable children and promote equity; and to develop data-driven policy advocacy partnerships aimed at advancing child wellbeing and equity.

Dr. Acevedo-Garcia is also the faculty mentor for the Interdisciplinary Consortium on Urban Planning and Public Health (ICUPPH), an organization of students who have joined together around common interests at the intersection of the fields of public health and urban planning and design. She is co-founder of the Cross-national Initiative on Place, Migration and Health (CIPMH), a research network committed to understanding the health implications of migration processes using a cross-national lens, for research and policy. CIPMH has received support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University.

Dr. Acevedo-Garcia is a member of the Social Science Advisory Board of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council, Co-Chairs the Board of Directors of the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston, and is a member of the Board of Directors of Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts.

Larry Cohen, MSW
Executive Director
Prevention Institute

Mr. Cohen has led many successful public health efforts focused on tobacco control, healthy eating, safety and violence prevention at the state and federal level. He formed the first coalition in the nation to change tobacco policy, engaging the American Cancer Society, the American Heart Association, and the American Lung Association in the nation's first multi-city smoking ban. He established the Food and Nutrition Policy Consortium, whose work led to a county food policy and catalyzed the nation's food labeling law. He continues to work extensively on policies to improve nutrition and physical activity environments to prevent chronic disease. He also helped shape strategy to secure passage of bicycle and motorcycle helmet laws, strengthen child and adult passenger restraint laws, and establish fluoridation requirements in California.

Mr. Cohen's work focuses on strategies to reduce health disparities and he recently produced the position paper, [Reducing Inequities in Health and Safety through Prevention](#). He facilitated the [California Campaign to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health](#), and developed [THRIVE: Tool for Health and Resilience In Vulnerable Environments](#), a web-based tool designed to help communities identify and foster factors in the community environment that will improve health outcomes and reduce disparities experienced by racial and ethnic minorities. Mr. Cohen also helped to define violence as a preventable, public health issue and has trained and written nationally on primary prevention of gender violence. Mr. Cohen currently heads [UNITY \(Urban Networks to Increase Thriving Youth Through Violence Prevention\)](#), a national initiative designed to strengthen and support the 45 largest cities in the U.S. to more effectively prevent community violence.

Mr. Cohen authored or edited many publications related to primary prevention practice and comprehensive strategies to improve public health and health equity, including [Prevention is Primary: Strategies for Community Wellbeing](#), [The Spectrum of Prevention: Developing a Comprehensive Approach to Injury Prevention](#), and [Prevention for a Healthier California](#), which demonstrates the cost effectiveness of community-based prevention efforts. Mr. Cohen is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Injury Control and Emergency Health Services Section Public Service Award from the American Public Health Association, the Secretary's Award for Health Promotion from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and recognition from the American Cancer Society and the Society for Public Health Educators.