

## **Immigrants Helping Rebuild New Orleans Face Health Issues**

By Joe Gyan Jr

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NEW ORLEANS - The waves of Hispanic immigrants who poured into New Orleans in the weeks and months after Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters receded to help rebuild the city now are facing a torrent of health- and work-related issues, a panel of local and national experts said Friday.

Those issues include exposure to asbestos, lead and other toxins; lack of health insurance and mental health counseling; cultural and linguistic barriers in the health-care arena; scarce prenatal care for pregnant immigrant women; and housing challenges.

The bottom line, the speakers said, is that Louisiana and other Gulf Coast states were not adequately prepared to serve their pre- Katrina immigrant communities or the influx of immigrant day laborers who arrived after the storm.

"Whether it's a hurricane or a public health crisis, we need to be prepared," said Janet Murguia, president and chief executive officer of the National Council of La Raza, the largest national Hispanic civil-rights and advocacy organization in the United States.

"A community can only recover if it's a healthy community for all, documented and undocumented," NCLR board member Andrea Bazan- Manson added during a roundtable discussion - titled "Latino Health Status in the Wake of Katrina - on the campus of Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine.

Bazan-Manson said Katrina changed the demographic makeup of New Orleans in addition to altering its physical landscape.

"We know we have a change in demographics here in New Orleans. It is a different New Orleans now," she said, noting that the area's Latino population doubled after Katrina from about 60,000 to a conservative 120,000. "Who knows. Latinos are hard to count sometimes."

Therein lies one of the problems, the NCLR says. Many Latinos are afraid to come forward for help because they fear they will be asked to provide documentation, and that failing to provide it will result in deportation proceedings.

While the Latino population in the New Orleans area escalated after Katrina with the arrival of immigrant workers and continues to climb because of hundreds of babies being born to those workers, Bazan-Manson bristled at the media's negative portrayal of the latter phenomenon as a "baby boom."

Pierre Buekens, dean of public health and tropical medicine at Tulane, said the boom - for lack of a better word - has not been limited to the Hispanic population in New Orleans. A rise in

births is typical after such an event as Katrina, he said, adding that the same thing occurred in South Carolina months after Hurricane Hugo hit that state in the late 1980s.

In the case of New Orleans, he said, a larger Latino population logically translates into more Latino babies being born.

"I don't know if there's really a baby boom," said Shaula Lovera, director of the Latino Health Access Network operated by Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of New Orleans.

Of more importance, Lovera said, is the scarcity of prenatal services in the New Orleans area due to the fact that the hurricane devastated the area's health-care system.

Gina Lutz, coordinator of the Latino Health Outreach Project of the Common Ground Health Clinic in New Orleans, said undocumented mothers should be covered by the state's LaCHIP program. Louisiana offers public health insurance through Medicaid and LaCHIP for children in families earning up to double the federal poverty level.

Buekens said estimates put the percentage of Latinos in Orleans Parish and neighboring Jefferson at 8 percent and 10 percent, respectively - which is double the amount pre-Katrina.

"These are all Americans, in one way, shape or form," Dr. Garth Graham, deputy assistant secretary for minority health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, said.

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