

The black caucus of health workers (BCHW) – 50th anniversary

Editorial

“Living History: Honoring our Past, Uplifting our Future” the BCHW celebrates 50 Years of service (1968 – 2018). Fifty years ago, America was experiencing incredible ethnic, racial and civil unrest. The U.S. News described 1968 as one of the most tumultuous years that changed America forever. In 1968, the climate in the country was one of political and social turmoil following one traumatic event after another. To highlight a few, as a former Captain in the U. S. Army, I am keenly aware of the heightened escalation in the Vietnam antiwar sentiment; the mental, environmental and physical impact of Agent Orange; post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); use and abuse of illegal substances; riots following assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; assassination of Robert F. Kennedy; Civil Rights Act signed into law; infant mortality/morbidity disparities; prenatal, maternal, child care services; feminist movement; Shirley Chisholm first black woman elected to Congress; Special Olympics established; onset of neighborhood/community health centers; and, American Medical Association (AMA) publicly expressed need for African American physicians, to cite a few. Also in 1968, the American Public Health Association (APHA) held its 96th annual meeting in Detroit, Michigan. At the opening session, the focus was on smoking prevention and cessation. Although important, with the critical issues confronting America at the time, a statement prepared by “Concerned Black Members” of APHA called the leadership of APHA into action to address urban health and related problems. According to Dr. Iris Shannon, RN, PhD (a founding member of the BCHW and past APHA president), she and other African American members of APHA met following the opening session of the conference to share their concerns. They identified three specific areas requiring immediate attention: 1) lack of African American visible representation and involvement at the opening and daily sessions; 2) inequity in programing scientific sessions related to African Americans; and, 3) absence of African Americans in APHA leadership roles.

The members presented the proposal to APHA leadership with their recommendations. This historic meeting became the generating force behind establishing the BCHW. In collaboration with APHA leadership, the BCHW became the first and largest official affiliate. The mission of BCHW “is to strive for the elimination of disparities and the reduction of gaps in health and health outcomes by improving the quality of life of people of African descent through advocacy, knowledge, practice and research.” By-Laws were approved as the operating manual for the organization. According to Dr. Joseph Patterson, all founding members were active members of APHA. He stated, although other African American members were involved in the creation of the BCHW, archival records identify the founding members as: June Jackson Christmas, MD; Paul B. Cornely, MD, Dr. PH; William Darity, PhD; E. Frank Ellis, MD, MPH; Arthur Grist, PhD; James Horton, MD; and, George I. Lythcott, MD; Joseph Patterson, PhD, MPH; Jay Waller, Dr. PH; and, Bailus Walker, Jr., PhD, MPH. Three of the founding members became president of APHA. Dr. Paul B. Cornely was elected president in 1969 one year after founding the BCHW. E. Frank Ellis and Iris Shannon both were elected president

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in 1977 and 1989 respectively. Today, the Caucus has grown into a premier membership organization for African American health care professionals. It serves as a training platform for new graduates in the field of public health and a springboard to higher positions for others.

Since its inception, some of the major contributions and influences of BCHW are highlighted as:

- I. Increased number of African American members in leadership roles within the organization.
- II. Supported elections of more than 15 BCHW members to become president of APHA. June Jackson Christmas, MD (1980); Bailus Walker, Jr., PhD, MPH (1988); Jay Waller, Dr. PH (*); A. Caswell Evans, Dr., DDS, MPH (1995); Carol E. Allen, PhD, RN, PHN (2000); Virginia A. Cain, MD (2004); Cheryl E. Allen, PhD, RN; (2009) Linda R. Murray, MD, MPH (2011); Mel Shipp, OD, Dr. PH, MPH (2012); Adewale Trotman, MD, MPH, MA (2013); Shiriki Kumanyika, PhD, MPH (2015); Camara P. Jones, MD, PhD, MPH (2016); and, Joseph Telfair, Dr. PH, MPH, MSW (2017).
- III. Supported members as chairs and co-chairs of standing committees, special primary interest groups (SPIG’s), representatives on the governing council, members on and chairs of the executive committee as well as APHA Presidents.
- IV. Endorsed candidates who support the mission of the BCHW and present their platform to the members during the annual meeting.
- V. Involved in research, policy, and health career initiatives focused on African Americans and other minority groups.
- VI. Increased the number of scientific sessions related directly and/or indirectly to African Americans during annual meetings.
- VII. Instrumental in the formation for the Analysis for African American Public Health Issues.
- VIII. Support members’ different professional entities and professions (i.e., SAAPHI, NAHSE, NMA, NBNA, NDA, NHA, NPA, etc.).
- IX. Participate in National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month (April) on local level.

- X. Participated in the National Minority Quality Forum Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) Health Brain-trust.
- XI. Established 3 BCHW Annual Awards recognizing those who made significant contributions improving public health and quality of life for African Americans and other minorities:
 - a) The Hildrus A. Poindexter, MD, PhD.
 - b) Distinguished Service Community Service Award.
 - c) Legislative Service Award.

While ethnic, racial and cultural challenges continue to confront this nation we are proud as we come together to celebrate BCHW

“50” years’ history and contributions. It is quite befitting, 50 years later, APHA conference theme for 2018 is, “Creating the Healthiest Nation: Health Equity Now!” What a difference 50 years can make! Join us, visit <http://blackcaucus1968.blogspot.com/p/announcements.html>. Send notes, photos, share experiences, etc.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.