**Fourth Public Health Systems Research Leadership Forum – November 9, 2004**

### *Background*

The Public Health Systems Research Leadership Forum (Forum) first met in 2001 in response to a growing desire in the public health field to embrace stronger collaboration between academic and practice communities in building an evidence-based understanding of what systems are required to improve the public's health. The Forum, convened by the Council on Linkages between Academia and Public Health Practice (Council), was charged with several tasks including: developing a list of research questions and priorities (a research agenda for the field); facilitating communication among individuals engaged in public health systems research (PHSR); identifying institutions that are equipped to conduct, and consumers who will use, this research; and ensuring that major funders are aware of the need for systems research in public health.

On November 9, 2004 the Council convened the fourth annual Forum during the 2004 Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association (APHA). Comments from session participants reveal that great progress has been made towards the Forum's goals. Accomplishments include:

- A formal affiliate (organization) has been formed with meetings held during the AcademyHealth Annual Research Meeting to enable public health systems researchers to share methods, findings, and questions.
- Research agendas have been established in the following areas—general public health systems, workforce, rural health, and rural preparedness—as well as a set of highest priorities among the agendas proposed in the 2003 Forum.
- Several forum participants identified their institutions as "Centers of Excellence" for PHSR.
- The National Association of County and City Health Officials announced its interest in having researchers study a series of questions related to the voluntary accreditation of local health departments and the certification or credentialing of public health workers.

### *2004 Forum*

This year's Forum brought together representatives of several organizations that fund PHSR and related research to address the question of how, in light of this progress, the public health field can assure that necessary resources be allocated to study critical questions, which, if answered, would help public health systems and agencies better serve their communities. Comprising the panel were:

Jennifer Chang, MPH
Public Health Analyst, Office of Rural Health Policy
Health Resources and Services Administration

Barbara A. DeBuono, MD, MPH
Senior Medical Director/Group Leader, U.S. Public Health/U.S. Medical
Pfizer Global Pharmaceuticals
Pfizer Inc.

Jerry P. Flanzer, PhD
Program Official, Division of Epidemiology, Services and Prevention Research

National Institute on Drug Abuse
National Institutes of Health

Candice Nowicki-Lehnherr
Acting Deputy Director, Office of Workforce and Career Development
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Pamela Williams Russo, MD, MPH
Senior Program Officer
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Robin M. Weinick, PhD
Senior Advisor for Intramural Research and
Senior Advisor on Safety Nets and Low-Income Populations
Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

Dr. Hugh Tilson, Senior Advisor to the Dean of the School of Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and chair of the PHSR task force of the Council, served as the moderator.

Three major themes emerged from the session. First, many participants and panelists expressed the need for better coordination of research efforts and their financing. The affiliate meeting at AcademyHealth, which grew out of the Forum, is one valuable setting for researchers to keep abreast of the latest developments in PHSR. It was suggested that the Forum continue to strive to bring other players to the table and to strengthen collaboration. Session participants noted that such institutions as the National Library of Medicine (NLM), the National Center for Health Statistics, and the APHA Academic Public Health Caucus can further the Forum's efforts by helping to coordinate research, provide useful data sets, and advocate for PHSR. It is also important to enhance cooperation among funding organizations. Panelists said the Forum represents the only opportunity they are aware of that encourages funders of PHSR to talk to each other. Many panelists said they were unaware of the projects their peers were engaged in. Dr. Flanzer stated that the current system, in which different agencies are pursuing parallel processes, is "crazy." Better coordination among funding agencies and organizations would likely reduce duplication of efforts and better leverage initiatives in the area. The Forum could play a key role in continuing to bring together funders, researchers, and consumers of PHSR in the belief that it would promote cost effective approaches to PHSR and ensure that the research itself is relevant to the practice community.

The second theme involves the need to devise better ways of marketing the importance of PHSR. Dr. Flanzer advised participants to involve consumers of research in efforts to set priorities and influence funders. Dr. Russo stated that it is important to focus on efforts that can demonstrate the impact of PHSR efforts. For example, government agencies have much interest in learning how to get the most out of their preparedness dollar. It is important to demonstrate to organizations that conduct either general public health research or health systems research, the value of devoting attention to systems work and public health. The Forum can take advantage of several institutions that are in the process of fine-tuning their research priorities to highlight the value of PHSR. This might include working with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as it establishes new research offices as part of its reorganization efforts, encouraging Research!America and AcademyHealth to embrace PHSR as part of their public health research initiatives, and working with academic health departments to carve out resources devoted to PHSR. Furthermore Dr. DeBuono advised the Forum to

refine an “elevator speech” that would allow advocates to quickly define PHSR and state its value in improving the public’s health.

The third theme to emerge was the support of all panel participants for the field. Participants gave examples of their current support of the field, describing both agency resources directed to specific research projects and broader support of researchers undertaking PHSR. They further provided examples of potential flexibility of current funding and prospects for potential future funding in the area.

Overall, session participants were very supportive of the work of the Forum and expressed a strong interest in seeing it continued. The Council is well suited to convene the Forum because of its ability to foster collaboration between the practice and academic communities. The Council will continue to convene the Forum and to count advancing PHSR as a high priority.

**Challenges for the Future**

The Forum will continue to strive to bring together stakeholders to promote research on issues that will strengthen public health systems and ultimately improve the public’s health. The following are tasks that the Forum and its partners hope to pursue in the future:

1. The Council, in conjunction with the Public Health Foundation, will establish a National Registry of PHSR Agendas. It will make available electronic copies of existing research agendas and will coordinate with the NLM to make available documentation of what is known in the field and where the major gaps in knowledge are. Ultimately one organization should be charged with monitoring the agendas and tracking progress.
2. The Forum will develop a consensus definition of PHSR and a brief speech that could be used to explain what PHSR is, how it is distinctive from and can be integrated into health care systems research on the one hand and public health research on the other, and why it is valuable. This information will be compiled in a one-page summary and disseminated broadly.
3. The Council will convene a group of funders for a day-long meeting to facilitate greater investment in the field and collaboration among supporters.
4. The Forum will focus on the question of what Centers of Excellence for PHSR should look like—including characteristics, minimum standards, and budgetary needs—and, in the aggregate, what the research infrastructure for the field would entail.
5. Based on this better understanding of the characteristics of the Centers for Excellence, an estimate of how many such Centers would be necessary, and the volume and nature of the highest priority research agenda, the Forum will work toward a national consensus on a national budget illustrating how much it would cost to fully delve into PHSR, and a plan for achieving it.