



NDCA

National Disease Clusters Alliance

The Honorable Barbara Boxer
US Senate
112 Senate Hart Building
Washington DC 20510

March 1, 2011

Dear Senator Boxer,

I am writing to express the National Disease Cluster Alliance's enthusiastic support for your bill to strengthen protections for children and communities from disease clusters.

Currently, chronic diseases like cancer, birth defects, and multiple sclerosis strike over 100 million men, women and children, accounting for more than a third of the U.S. population. These diseases are responsible for seven out of ten deaths in the United States.

Around the country—from the Acreage, Florida to Kettleman City, California to Fort LeJeune, North Carolina—communities are faced with unusually high rates of disease, or in other words, disease "clusters," and health officials are unable to determine why. Questions abound about what is causing these elevated rates. Is there something in the drinking water? Does the nearby military institution impact our health? Is the air we breathe causing us to get sick? Too often questions posed to local health officials are not answered satisfactorily or not even responded to at all.

Although over 1000 concerned residents request investigations into suspected disease clusters every year, cluster investigations are rarely undertaken by government agencies. When it comes to tackling infectious disease, public health institutions perform well, but they do not have the same ability to identify and respond to environmentally-related illnesses. Health officials are currently working with their hands tied as they don't have the resources or time to address the concerns. This results in tremendous frustration for concerned community members and a significant loss of trust in government. Your bill will increase federal and state capacity to answer questions about disease clusters asked by concerned community members.

While no community is immune from a potential disease cluster, residents of low-income and racial minority communities are at disproportionate risk for exposure to environmental hazards, and potential disease clusters. Your bill will create safer and

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healthier communities across the nation, by identifying communities at risk and halting emerging disease clusters.

We are also delighted by your commitment to community based participatory research. There is true vision in creating a solution in which government, science and community work as equal partners in responding to disease cluster inquiries.

This bill will provide more research into causation and prevention of disease. By investigating the environment in areas with health impacts, we have the opportunity to address significant weaknesses that presently exist in the investigation of possible disease clusters. Bringing environmental agencies to the table will support the ongoing work of health agencies and add important scientific expertise to these investigations.

A strength of this bill is that it includes access to laboratories to conduct biomonitoring and environmental analysis to measure contaminants in people's bodies as well as in air, water, food, and soil. This lack of data is the weak link in current risk assessment and environmental exposure analysis. Communities currently lack access to technical assistance and this bill corrects that.

Transparency and governmental accountability are overarching goals of this legislation and have the potential to make agencies more proactive rather than reactive.

There is now an urgent need to identify and respond to emerging disease clusters in communities, and fortunately, your bill will revolutionize the experience of communities facing disease clusters.

Sincerely yours,

Terry Nordbrock, MPH
Executive Director

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