

News Release

Wellness Week Launched in New York and Celebrated throughout the Americas

New York, 16 September 2011 (PAHO/WHO) – An audience of hundreds gathered in Harlem, New York, today to celebrate the launch of Wellness Week, an initiative that aims to raise awareness among government officials, the private sector, civil society organizations, and the general public of the importance of creating healthy environments and adopting public policies that encourage and facilitate healthier lifestyles.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York declared September 16 to 21 as New York Wellness Week through a proclamation presented by New York Health Commissioner Thomas Farley.

Today's launch of Wellness Week was organized jointly by the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO), the World Economic Forum, the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, the New York Academy of Medicine, and the City College of New York.

Mayors and other officials from 23 cities in 12 countries of the Americas and Spain participated in similar celebrations with activities aimed at preventing noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Many sent greetings that were broadcast during the Harlem event.

“In launching Wellness Week, we are sending a message to governments, communities and individuals that social action combined with public policies is critical to halting the epidemic of NCDs,” said PAHO Director Dr. Mirta Roses. She added that upwards of 5 percent of global gross domestic product is spent on NCDs, which are a major economic burden for patients and their families, as well as for countries.

The growing global epidemic of NCDs will be the focus next week of the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases, which is being held Sept. 19 and 20 in New York. Heads of state and government from countries around the world will gather to discuss actions needed to better prevent and control these diseases.

Cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and chronic respiratory disease are today the leading causes of death throughout the world. In the Americas, one in four people suffers from at least one of these diseases. Some 3.9 million people die each year from NCDs, 1.5 million of them before the age of 70.

In Harlem, Wellness Week activities today included a health fair, where residents could have their blood pressure taken, learn about options for healthier eating, and participate in exercise sessions or a Karate demonstration.

Health Commissioner Farley expressed thanks for the organizers' choice of New York as the launching site for Wellness Week and highlighted some of the initiatives New York City has carried out to reduce the burden of NCDs. He also said that New York will present a report to next week's UN meeting on similar initiatives that are applicable to other parts of the world.

“New York City recognizes a critical truth: that better health is not just a matter of individual choices. Rather, public policies are key to making healthy living viable and sustainable by shaping the environments in which children and youths, adults and senior citizens live, play, work, and travel. Public policies are needed to ensure that the healthy choices are easy choices to make, to ensure that people grow well and stay well,” said Dr. Roses.

Sarita Nayyar, Director of the World Economic Forum, said commitment from both the private and public sectors was needed to ensure the necessary changes. She called on the private sector to join Wellness Week and the social movement it should spark.

Other participants in the launch included the President of the New York Academy of Medicine, Dr. Jo Ivey Boufford; City College President, Dr. Lisa Staiano-Coico; and the Director of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, Lloyd Williams; among others. Democratic Congressman Charles Rangel called for stepped-up action to fight noncommunicable diseases and criticized cuts in health programs that he said make it more difficult to fight these diseases.

The event closed with a series of messages from health authorities and mayors from cities in Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Peru, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Spain.

The idea for Wellness Week was originally inspired by Caribbean Wellness Day, which is celebrated each Sept. 13 by countries in the Caribbean to raise awareness of noncommunicable diseases and to encourage healthy lifestyles.