

Pacific Islands Declare Health Emergency due to NCDs

Langue Anglais

The Pacific Island Health Officers Association declared a Regional State of Health Emergency on May 25th due to the epidemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the United States Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI), which include American Samoa, Guam, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands.

“These islands have some of the highest rates of non-communicable disease in the world. Diabetes, heart diseases, strokes, cancer and other NCDs are killing off Pacific peoples, placing a significant burden on their daily functionality, and threatening the national security of these island countries and territories,” explained Dr. Stevenson Kuartei, PIHOA President and Minister of Health of the Republic of Palau. “Non-communicable diseases impair workers, increase absenteeism, cause untold suffering to patients and families but also lead to increased health care costs, including off island medical referrals.”

The Emergency Declaration was first proposed during the 48th PIHOA Meeting in American Samoa, held March 28th through April 1st, 2010 and formally ratified today. Besides declaring a Regional State of Health Emergency, the declaration directs the PIHOA Secretariat to partner with a wide variety of groups to develop a regional NCD policy that will help coordinate partners and resources more effectively and make an array of recommendations to donors, health agencies, legislatures, regional associations, traditional leaders, community- and faith-based groups, and other sectors besides health, including agriculture, education, and trade.

“This isn’t just a problem for the health sector,” continued Dr. Kuartei, “ We need to convert to healthier diets, eliminate tobacco use, limit alcohol consumption and significantly increase physical activity, and to do this, we need parents, farmers, fishermen, media, legislators, presidents, governors, traditional leaders, pastors, business people, educators, health providers and planners to be mobilized. What is needed is a whole of society approach. While there are promising efforts and programs, the current approach just isn’t working overall. It’s too fragmented, badly coordinated, non-integrated and depends too much on just the health sector.

Things are not going to get better unless the society is mobilized because right now, we’re headed for social and economic catastrophe.”

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