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**Testimony Presented to the Illinois Chronic Disease Task Force  
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The Illinois Department of Public Health must continue to “leverage the power and resources” provided by the members of the faith based community in preparing for and responding to public health emergencies. Faith leaders are often the first responders in a crisis and the most sought after resources when disasters or pandemics occur. Faith based organizations provide temporary shelter, food, clothing and even medical assistance during emergencies. Faith institutions also provide a number of often overlooked resources that aid in community awareness and education in emergency preparedness and chronic disease education

Over the past three years since the Katrina disaster and the H1N1 crisis, faith based leaders in Illinois have been active partners with the Illinois Department of Public Health. Thousands of faith leaders throughout the state of Illinois received training in emergency preparedness tools and techniques and in the H1N1 flu education and prevention strategies. The trainings enhanced the relationship between faith leaders and the Illinois Department of Public Health and resulted in :

1. number of faith leaders trained in risk communication practices and principles
2. inclusion of faith leaders in a state wide database of emergency response resources
3. connected faith leaders to key state and county public health staff across the state

One of the greatest strengths of a strong partnership between faith and public health is the ability to expand the level of public health information to families and individuals. Faith leaders are the only people who meet with masses of people on a weekly or biweekly basis. Many faith leaders have expanded their level of communication to include radio and television broadcasts, Internet streaming, and social networking sites. The use of faith leaders to communicate important public health and emergency preparedness messages enhances the ability of the broader community to make more effective decisions, and to understand the importance of the messages provided.

The best example of the successful use of faith leaders in public health communication was evidenced by the overwhelming response to H1N1 flu vaccinations in Illinois by a record number of individuals who received the H1N1 flu vaccination and information as a direct result of the partnerships between IDPH and Illinois Faith leaders. Additionally, the faith leaders aided in both communication and the response efforts during the Katrina disaster and later during the 2010 floods in Illinois. The faith leaders were directing responsible for the victims of each disasters receiving a measure of compassion, conviction, and optimism, all of which are critical

elements for recovery, according to the CDC, in aiding victims of disasters. We provide these examples of effective faith partnerships as evidence of the need for the Chronic Disease Task Force and the Illinois Department Public Health to continue to strengthen its relationships and network with the faith based leadership.

On behalf of the members of the faith across the state and around the world we realize in times of crisis we help victims from every walk of life wrestle with the most frequently asked questions during a disaster, pandemic or crisis:

- Why did God let this happen?
- Why me?
- Why not me?
- Is there a God?
- Where is God?
- Why did God abandon us?
- Is God punishing us?
- How do I/we get through this?
- How do I/we know if God is listening, watching and willing?
- How can we forgive those who caused this?

We know that faith plays an essential role in the life of everyone. We know that faith leaders are an essential part of any public health team. We hope that this task force realizes that faith leaders and faith institutions provide critical resources and support in the form of:

- transportation
- communication of messages
- shelter
- food and clothing
- grief and loss counseling
- mobilization of volunteers
- training and command center sites in times of disasters

It is important that the Illinois Department of Public Health formalize its partnerships with the faith leadership located in the state of Illinois by:

- establishing a formal interfaith advisory team
- placing a faith chair at the emergency preparedness table along with the Red Cross and other voluntary response organizations

The Chronic Disease Task Force should embrace the wealth of resources that lie within the walls of the faith based institutions. This task force should seek to establish a network of faith leaders in every county in Illinois that can aid and assist in disseminating information through broadcast media, weekly faith bulletins and denominational newsletters and magazines. This is one of the most essential partners this task force can form.