



**Building Healthy Communities to  
Improve Maternal and Child Health**

## **APHA-Maternal Child Health Institute Goes Global**

Maternal and Child Health (MCH) is a global concern, impacting individuals, families, and society. There have been marked improvements in MCH seen through access to preconception care, folic acid intake during pregnancy, and increased childhood immunizations, among many other notable advances. However, there is still work to be done. Each year millions of women and children die from preventable causes. Evidence-based practices are available to help limit these untimely deaths but are not always available or communicated to those most in need. In order to increase awareness of such effective prevention tactics, approaches to improving MCH must include effective leadership and intersectoral collaboration.

The American Public Health Association (APHA) with funding from Colgate Palmolive founded the Maternal and Child Health Community Leadership Institute (MCHLI). This leadership development and training program includes expert led faculty presentations, a Maternal and Child Health scientific session track during APHA Annual Meeting, and distance learning opportunities throughout the year. The Institute provides public health professionals and MCH community leaders with

beneficial tools for capacity building within a group effort and ultimately assists participants in honing and fully developing their leadership skills.

At its inception, the Institute focused primarily on MCH issues within the United States but has since expanded to include a global framework. In collaboration with the World Federation of Public Health Associations, APHA invited members of the Ethiopian Public Health Association (EPHA) to attend the Institute.

EPHA participants focused on the major impediments to health system strengthening including limited national health budgets and reduced health workforce. Participants were presented with strategies to improve health systems while working in constrained environments. Sessions encouraged the integration of collaborative work and community engagement in program planning. Methods to increase culturally appropriate interventions were discussed and a review of current MCH literature allowed participants to focus on the gaps in program development and consider methods to address these shortcomings. EPHA members networked with APHA members and one group learned from the other.

This year the MCHLI welcomed participation from persons from the Caribbean, representing the CARICOM region. These CARICOM Nationals explored their leadership abilities and styles, discussed social determinants of health, and prioritized the specific MCH issues impacting the Caribbean region. *Future Search* principles were explored enforcing the importance of collaboration with non-traditional partners and working across sectors.

Participants were able to prioritize MCH service issues specific to their country but they also discussed ways to address issues from a regional perspective.

The MCHLI has provided a forum for cross cultural training helping to facilitate partnerships, highlight research, foster communication, increase community support, and promote advocacy. This inclusive approach addresses the needs of economically disadvantaged populations, low-income nations, and other socially underprivileged groups. Ultimately participants acquire new approaches and skills that they implement as they work to improve MCH issues in their home countries.

These global partnerships demonstrate a leadership process that sustains collaboration and strengthens capacity building initiatives. Individual contributions are combined to form an inclusive way of problem solving and success is then measured as a collective endeavor.

Improving MCH is a complex issue but we cannot wait for change to occur. Instead we must broaden our thinking and work across sectors in lieu of individual approaches. There is a public health need and obligation to share best practices when developing MCH programs. The Institute not only exposes participants to best practices but they are given the opportunity to learn practical skills and develop action plans to implement once they have returned to their respective communities. Ultimately we must identify those who can help effect change and develop strategies to communicate this information in order to create healthy communities for women and children.