

# School of Public Health Hosts Meeting to Set Worker-Safety Research Agenda

By Melanie Hillis, Public Affairs

To identify the top research needs for Houston-area workers especially in health care, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) held a public forum Jan. 23 at the UT School of Public Health. The federal agency is responsible for conducting research and making recommendations for the prevention of work-related injury and illness.

As part of the National Occupational Research Agenda (NORA), speakers offered more than 30 presentations on different workplace risks and hazards. More than 100 registered participants — including representatives from industry and worker organizations, researchers, occupational health practitioners and students — listened attentively to the all-day “town hall” meeting.

“This meeting gave us a forum to speak for those who don’t have a voice and contribute to the development of a national research agenda that provides a framework for the investigation of the causes of workplace injury and prevent lives from being lost,” said meeting organizer Sarah A. Felknor, Dr.P.H., interim director of the Southwest Center for Occupational and Environmental Health at the UT School of Public Health.

The forum focused on the U.S. health care industry, which employs an estimated 13.5 million workers. Health care workers are at risk for illness and injuries due to long hours, changing shifts, physically demanding tasks, violence and exposures to infectious diseases and hazardous chemicals.

Felknor pointed out that more than 12,000 injuries and illnesses are reported daily in the United States, and many more go unreported. “This was an important event, and the testimony provided will be articulated into funding priorities for the next decade,” she said.

“Health care is a particularly complex industry due to the multiplicity of hazards not found in other workplace settings,” said Felknor.

The national schedule of public forums is seen as a key part of a federal effort to keep the U.S. economy strong in the next decade by reducing worker injuries and risks.

“Without attention to the safety and health of workers, you can’t be productive or competitive, because safety and health is

a fundamental value,” said institute director John Howard, M.D. “It’s not good business practice to not have that fundamental value. If you don’t pay attention to workers’ well-being, you can’t be as successful.”

The National Occupational Research Agenda was unveiled in 1996 to set up

a blueprint for planning and conducting research that will prevent workplace injuries and illnesses. Over 500 individuals and organizations contributed to the first agenda.

“We learned about latex allergies from a group of nurses attending a town hall meeting in the 1990s,” said Max Lum, Ed.D., associate director of NIOSH’s Communications and Global Collaboration. “Before that, latex allergies hadn’t even been on our radar.”

A wide range of presenters included: Martha Vela Acosta, M.D., of the UT School of Public Health’s Brownsville Regional Campus, on agriculture issues for migrant and seasonal farm workers; Bobbi Ryder of the National Center for Farmworker Health on occupational safety for agricultural farm workers; David Dedrick of Linbeck Group on how workers get hurt in the construction industry; and Ann Malecha from Texas Woman’s University on workplace violence.

“For a lot of these folks (speakers), this is their life. It’s very vital that the federal institute that’s in charge of this activity — in terms of getting money from Congress, dividing it appropriately, making relevant decisions and carrying it through — listen, because these people are our watchdogs,” said Howard.

“This event was important for the UT Health Science Center because it afforded faculty, students, staff and local practicing professionals the ability to communicate directly with the senior leadership of NIOSH and to help frame the upcoming national research agenda,” said Robert Emery, Dr.P.H., associate professor of occupational health.

NIOSH is part of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the Department of Health and Human Services. NIOSH receives \$100 million annually and sponsors research and training through grants and funding. For more information on NORA, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/nora>.



Max Lum, Ed.D., left, associate director for Health Communications and Global Collaboration, NIOSH; Sarah Felknor, Dr.P.H., center, interim director of the School of Public Health’s Southwest Center for Occupational and Environmental Health; Sid Soderholm, Ph.D., right, NIOSH NORA coordinator, during the NIOSH Town Hall Meeting at the school. Photo by P. Michele Mocco



Town hall attendees listen to worker safety presentations. Photo by P. Michele Mocco

## Team Up for a Good Cause at WalkAmerica

If a morning of fresh air, friends and a bit of exercise sounds like fun, add in supporting a good cause and that totals up to plenty of reasons to put on your walking shoes and join hundreds of UT Health Science Center walkers for the annual March of Dimes WalkAmerica, 9 a.m., Sunday, April 30, on the University of Houston campus. The start/finish line is at the intersection of Cullen Boulevard and Holman Street.

A UT tent at UH’s Robertson Stadium parking lot will offer shelter and snacks for health science center team walkers. Snack service begins at 8 a.m. Teams of health science center walkers are being formed for the event.

WalkAmerica is one of the largest one-day, fund-raising programs in the country aimed at helping to save babies’ lives.

- To find out the team captain for a specific health science center area, visit <http://www.uthouston.edu/community/marchofdimes/>.
- To help with the WalkAmerica effort, sign up to walk or make an outright donation.

The WalkAmerica contact for the university effort is Rose.M.Betancourt-Trevino@uth.tmc.edu, (713) 500-3209, in the Office of Public Affairs. ★



Enjoy yourself and help others at WalkAmerica. File photo

## Flu Disaster Response Program Funded

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“As the last several months have indicated, disasters happen with little or no notice. It does not matter the disaster, what matters is the preparedness,” said Casscells. “The need to respond in an expedient manner is great. It is also important to educate the community prior to and during disasters, whether natural or man-made.”

Casscells said that the work of TexSHIELD will assist in the war on terrorism and help provide rapid relief services to U.S. allies.

TexSHIELD follows more than \$16 million in competitive grant awards to the Texas Training and Technology for Trauma and Terrorism (T5) program at the health science

center. T5 develops and tests a variety of telemedicine and telecommunication technologies that feature real-time remote monitoring of patients located where hospital care is not readily available. These technologies will offer emergency medical care in rural areas, on the battlefield and in disaster areas.

“I would like to thank Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison and Congressman Tom DeLay for supporting this critical avian influenza preparedness program,” said Casscells. “Dr. Lillibridge and I look forward to developing and implementing the tools for TexSHIELD in order to reduce the impact of this looming pandemic.”

To learn more about TexSHIELD, visit <http://www.texshield.org>. ★

## Laughs Free, But Limited

Radio Music Theatre, 2623 Colquitt (near Richmond and Kirby), offers a free evening of laughter for UT Health Science Center at Houston faculty, staff, residents, fellows, students and volunteers during the entire month of March. Mention UT Health Science when you make your reservations and your party will be admitted free to any available 8:30 p.m., Thursday or 10:30 p.m., Saturday performance. In the March presentation, “I Love You But You are Sitting on My Cat,” the trio of actors

morphs into more than a dozen different characters during the course of the show.

Call the theatre box office, (713) 522-7722, to make required reservations, which are subject to availability. No cover charge nor minimum purchase is required.

Box office hours are 11 a.m.-7 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday. The theater’s Web site is at <http://www.radiomusictheatre.com>. For more information contact Elease.P.Jenkins@uth.tmc.edu, Office of Public Affairs, (713) 500-3035. ★

## Correction

The article on the Scholarship Golf Classic, in the December issue of *The Leader*, contained incorrect information about Jeffrey Katz, M.D., anesthesiology, and Allan Katz, M.D., obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive services, both at the Medical School. They are not brothers.