

Countries to Promote Access to Health Care as a Human Right

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International treaties are valuable tools for advancing the health of vulnerable groups

Washington, D.C., Sept. 29, 2010 (PAHO) — Health leaders from throughout the Americas agreed today to work to improve access to health for vulnerable groups by promoting and monitoring compliance with international human rights treaties and standards.

Ministers of health and other high-level delegates to the 50th Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) committed themselves to working with governmental human right agencies to evaluate and monitor the implementation of international treaties and standards, particularly as they relate to the right to health for vulnerable groups, including people with mental disorders or disabilities, older people, women and adolescents, people with HIV and indigenous people.

A number of international treaties and standards protect the human rights of all people without distinction as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political affiliation, national origin, or economic or social condition. Many of these accords are binding on states, that is, they oblige governments to implement their provisions.

The right to health is defined as a basic human right in a number of these agreements, including the 1946 Constitution of the World Health Organization (WHO), the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Together, these instruments provide a valuable legal and conceptual framework for efforts aimed at improving the health of poor and excluded groups, promoting equity in health and ensuring accountability in health systems, as well as for monitoring countries' progress toward achieving the MDGs.

The resolution approved today calls on PAHO to support its member countries in the following areas:

- Strengthening the technical capabilities of government health and human rights agencies to jointly monitor, assess and oversee health services' compliance with international human rights treaties and standards.
- Promote systematic technical cooperation between PAHO and its Member States in the design, review, and reform of health legislation, plans and policies in accordance with international human rights provisions applicable to vulnerable groups, especially in the context of primary health care.
- Strengthening health workers' knowledge and skills in the use of international human rights instruments, especially to promote efficient, high-quality health care and through the exchange of successful experiences between PAHO Member States and international organizations.
- Adopting legislative, administrative and educational measures to improve the dissemination of international norms and standards that protect the right to health, among personnel in national legislatures, courts and other government institutions.
- Strengthening civil society organizations through health and human rights training, awareness raising, education and information, and by combating stigma and discrimination against the groups most affected by health problems and disabilities.

The PAHO Directing Council brings together ministers of health and other high-level delegates from throughout the Americas each year to set priorities for Pan-American cooperation in health and to guide PAHO's technical cooperation programs in its Member States.

PAHO was established in 1902 and is the world's oldest public health organization. It works with all the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of the people of the Americas and serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of the World Health Organization (WHO).