

Climate Change: SUNY Broome alumna discusses public health impact with Obama

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When she worked at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore, pediatric nurse Charlotte Wallace noticed the rising number of children with asthma. At the time, she attributed it to air pollution.

Looking back, she now sees another factor: climate change.

Wallace, who graduated from SUNY Broome in 1999 and later from the University of Maryland, had the opportunity to discuss the health impacts of climate change with no less than President Barack Obama. In April, she joined the President, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, a range of health experts and others at Howard University Medical School for a panel discussion and widely-covered press conference.

During the press conference, Obama sat next to Wallace and mentioned her by name.

"We'll use the example of Charlotte Wallace, a pediatric nurse in Maryland for 18 years," Obama said, noting Wallace's experience in treating children with asthma. "And as a nurse and a mom, she understands that climate change is going to be making a difference."

Community public health is a passion for Wallace, who serves as the sustainability coordinator at Anne Arundel Medical Center while working on a master's degree in public health from the University of Maryland. In 2012, she was awarded the Nursing Leadership in Environmental Health Award from Maryland Hospitals for a Healthy Environment for her achievements in reducing occupational and environmental hazards.

She became involved in the panel discussion through her advisor at UMD.

"I was tired of seeing kids suffer from diseases that could be prevented," she said of her interest in public health.

The discussion opened with Obama stating the importance of the topic. Because climate change happens gradually, the health implications may not be immediately visible.

But they exist. Wildfires – sparked by storms or worsened by drought – can send particulates into the air, exacerbating pollution and respiratory disease. Insects may expand their range and bring disease with them. Heavy rain could lead to mold, another respiratory stressor, and strong storms can prompt power outages, endangering fragile populations. A warming climate will expand and worsen the allergy season, and the danger of heat-related illnesses rises with the mercury.

“There are a whole host of public impacts that are going to hit home,” the President said during the press conference, announcing a move to make more than 150 data sets on climate change and public health open to the public.

A native of Binghamton and mother of two, Wallace has been a resident of Maryland since 1995 and has seen the impact firsthand. A 2013 study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology showed that Maryland led the country in the number of premature deaths from air pollution. The problem is particularly severe in Baltimore, where up to 20 percent of children have asthma – more than twice the national average of 9.4 percent.

A 2011 study estimated that Maryland had 402,170 adults and 126,197 children with asthma, with the impact of the disease costing more than \$1 billion annually. Nationally, the study estimated that the U.S. has more than 19 million adults and nearly 7 million children with the disease, at a cost of more than \$53 billion. In New York State, more than 1.3 million adults and nearly 415,000 children have the disease, with an estimated cost of nearly \$3.5 billion.

“The President gets the importance of public health. He really gets the health disparity,” Wallace reflected.

Obama was interested in knowing what panel participants saw and experienced in their areas, as well as ways to address the public health impact. Even with health insurance, chronic diseases such as asthma have an impact on both the healthcare system and on society – in missed days of school and work, and increased use of health services.

Knowing the potential contributors to public health issues can only help.

“It’s a really good idea to look upstream at what threw you in the river,” she said.

President Barack Obama participates in a roundtable discussion on climate change and public health at the Howard University College of Medicine in Washington, D.C., April 7, 2015. Attendees include: Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Administrator Gina McCarthy; Surgeon General Vivek Murthy; Salih Grevious, student Howard University Medical School; Charlotte Wallace, Sustainability Coordinator, Anne Arundel Medical Center; Eneshal “Cookie” Miller, mother of child with asthma and advocate; Dr. Tyra Bryant-Stephens, Director and founder, The Community Asthma Prevention Program, Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia; Dr. Cliff Mitchell, Director of the Environmental Health Bureau, Department of Health and Mental Jygiene; and Dr. Edward Cornwell, Dead of Howard University Medical School; and Senior Advisors Velerie Jarrett and Brian Deese. (Official White House Photo by Pete Souza)

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