

How health issues can help organize women— and why it's important

*Perspectives from a Berger-Marks Trustee**

As director of Cervical Cancer Prevention Works, CLUW, Berger-Marks Trustee Carolyn Jacobson is passionate about the important role unions can play in educating women workers about health and preventing problems. CLUW (Coalition of Labor Union Women) delegates endorsed this vision when they passed a resolution at their fall convention committing the group to continue its involvement in health care issues.

But what does this have to do with organizing? It's one of the many ways to show that a union improves the lot of workers. As Jacobson argues, "Union women... unlike most other American women, have access to regular communications from a trusted source, that is, their union. [And] research shows that women will unionize around quality of life issues more readily than around wages."

For some women and their families, getting the right preventive information in time will be a matter of life or death. (As Jacobson points out, women are usually the health gatekeepers of the family.) How can a union be more relevant than that?

Jacobson explains how unions can get involved, with the fight against cervical cancer as a key example.

* The Berger-Marks Foundation (www.bergermarks.org) seeks to bring the benefits of unionization to working women and to assist organizations committed to those principles.



What you need to know to prevent cervical cancer

- Cervical cancer comes from a virus (from persistent high risk strains of the human papillomavirus, HPV);
- HPV is transmitted by skin-to-skin contact;
- Cervical cancer can be prevented (70% of the high risk strains of HPV can be prevented by getting the new HPV vaccine (approved for girls and young women aged 9-26)) and by getting screened regularly using the most current appropriate technology, which for women 30 or older is Pap and HPV test
- Most union health plans cover the vaccine and the screenings that are necessary... and if they don't, the union should push for coverage under their plan.

PROVIDING HEALTH INFORMATION: It's good for you, good for the union —and it saves money too!

*By Carolyn Jacobson
Director, Cervical Cancer Prevention Works, CLUW*

If we are smart and pro-active about our health we can live longer, more comfortable, and more fulfilling lives. We can also spend less of our own (and the unions' and society's) money and avoid many illnesses and premature death.

Research shows that workers would be willing to take a greater degree of responsibility for their health (including modifying unhealthy behaviors and reaching out for help) but they don't know where to begin or how to proceed.

Women don't know this cancer is 100% preventable

I head up a project called Cervical Cancer Prevention Works CCPW. The project focuses on making sure union women know that cervical cancer is 100% preventable—and how to prevent it. CCPW is a project of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, CLUW, (www.cluw.org), the only national organization representing union women.

Union women, like most U.S. women, don't know that cervical cancer is 100% preventable and how to prevent it. As a result, 11,150 U.S. women will get cervical cancer this year and 3,670 will die

from it. Union women (there are 6.5 million of them in the U.S.), unlike most other American women, have access to regular communications from a trusted source, that is, their union. More unions should be using their communications channels to reach their members with health information.

Urge unions to communicate health information

I write this article to encourage readers to urge their unions to communicate health information to their members.

There is lots of good (often free) health information (like how to prevent cervical cancer, see sidebar) available at no charge—information that union members need and will not get anywhere else—to help them be pro-active about their health. Having and following this information can increase the length, as well as the quality, of their lives. It can also help them and their unions hold on to the good health benefits the union has negotiated for them.

Women especially have much to gain by getting health information, as women are not only the health gatekeepers of the family, but they are also the primary consumers of health care generally.

A key to encouraging women to be pro-active about their health is getting

What is preventive health?

The most important part of preventive health care is keeping up good health habits, which include:

- Daily exercise
- Weight control
- Proper nutrition
- Avoidance of smoking and drug abuse
- Abstinence from, or moderation of, alcohol use
- Proper control of any diseases or disorders, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or high levels of cholesterol in the blood.

Professional services

In addition to these habits, there are some professional services that may prove worthwhile in preventing or at least minimizing disease:

- Periodic screening of adults for specific problems
- Many diseases can be effectively treated when detected early
- Keep immunizations up-to-date.

them to take responsibility for their own health—which is a two-step process involving education and action.

Letting them know about cervical cancer

Let's use cervical cancer as an example. Unions can easily provide information to empower union women with the knowledge they need about the disease, as well as the information and motivation to take specific actions to prevent it.

It is also important to remind women that it isn't selfish to put their own health first. One way to do this is by using the metaphor of the oxygen mask on the airplane: we are told to put our own on first, because if we don't, we might not be able to help the child sitting next to us. If women don't take care of themselves, they won't be around or able to take care of those they love.

My experience is that when women get this information, they are extremely grateful to the organization that is getting it to them. If it's coming from their union, it is a plus for the union... and it can also provide value added in organ-

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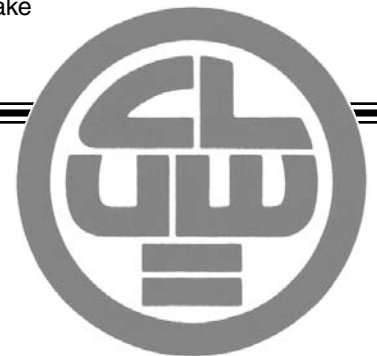
izing, especially since the research shows that women will unionize around "quality of life" issues more readily than around wages.

CLUW health resolution

Delegates to CLUW's recent convention adopted a resolution on this subject entitled, SUPPORT CLUW'S HEALTH CARE INVOLVEMENT. The resolution commits CLUW "to continue its involvement in health care issues." Specifically, it says that:

- CLUW support the efforts of its chapters to educate women about health care risks and prevention by providing available resources as needed;
- CLUW continue and further publicize its Cervical Cancer Prevention Works program—a program that can help eradicate this deadly form of cancer;
- CLUW support the work of its Women's Health and Wellness Committee in providing CLUW members with information they can use to maintain their health and fight off illness;
- CLUW make health care issues a cornerstone of its ongoing work to help all working women lead fuller, happier, longer, and more productive lives.

It's time for unions to follow CLUW's lead and it's union women who must demand that their unions take action!



Free Resources on Women's Health

Here are a few examples of excellent—and free—sources for information on women's health:

- CLUW Women's Health Links — <http://www.cluw.org/links-health.html>
- The National Women's Health Resource Center — <http://www.healthywomen.org/>
- Plan for Your Health (a public education program from Aetna) — <http://www.planforyourhealth.com/>
Includes *Navigating Your Health Benefits for Dummies* — <http://www.planforyourhealth.com/nyhb/>

On the U.S. Health and Human Services website:

- The National Women's Health Information Center — <http://www.womenshealth.gov/>
 - HHS Specific Populations — <http://www.hhs.gov/specificpopulations/index.shtml#women>
 - General Screenings and Immunizations for Women — <http://www.womenshealth.gov/screeningcharts/general/general.pdf>
 - Recommended Screenings, Tests, and Immunizations for Women with High-Risk Factors — <http://www.womenshealth.gov/screeningcharts/highrisk/highrisk.pdf>
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