

# Where there's smoke.....



assessing and promoting environmental awareness among neighborhood residents. As part of this work she is engaging close to 450 area residents in in-depth phone interviews.

This project will develop and validate an Environmental Health Engagement Profile, which is meant to stimulate and facilitate further needed research on human behavior and environmental health. Dr. Dixon's ultimate hope is that this tool will be helpful in enabling health care professionals to partner with individuals and communities to take a more proactive approach to improving environmental health and safety in areas where they live and work.

The bill before the Connecticut legislature the day Dr. Dixon offered her testimony highlights the potential of the role for such research to guide policy development. The bill, An Act Concerning The Incidence Of Pollution In Overburdened Communities (HBo6853), would have required state agencies, when considering applications for licenses, permits or authorizations, to consider the impact that additional pollution will have on communities that currently have high amounts of air pollutants, toxic emissions, waste water and stored solid waste—so-called overburdened communities.

Explains Dr. Dixon, "Right now, policy seems to work the other way;



Dr. Dixon looks out over New Haven Harbor. She says, "People are becoming concerned that the environment might affect their health and want information to help them do something about such concerns."

**On** a cold day in early March, Professor Jane Dixon set out for the state capital in Hartford. She was determined to speak out on behalf of YSN neighbors in the eastern section of New Haven who had grown accustomed to seeing their community bear the brunt of environmental impact from air pollution.

As a young woman, Dr. Dixon had been involved in the civil rights movement. Now, in her professional roles as a professor in YSN's doctoral program and a funded researcher, she found herself full circle, focusing on ways to make a difference in her community once again. After participating in the formation of the New Haven chapter of an activist group, the CT Coalition for Environmental Justice, she began to see how two threads of her life came together; her training as a health researcher and her passion to advocate for improvement of the human condition as a citizen in her own community.

Jane Dixon, PhD, has been teaching at YSN since 1977 and began working in the school's doctoral program in 1993, the year after its creation. Her research work explores environmental health engagement. Given the known relationships between environmental health hazards and health outcomes, Dr. Dixon believes it is important that people act to protect themselves from these health hazards.

In the course of her research and analysis of the perception of environmental impacts on the health of residents, Dr. Dixon became concerned with the public health issues in this neighborhood, which includes Fair Haven, the East Shore, and the East Rock area of New Haven. She decided to take action.

So as the state legislature considered a bill that would define and protect 'overburdened communities' from sources of pollution Dr. Dixon was in attendance. Then as the agenda turned to public comment, she simply sat down, identified herself, listed her credentials and began to share the insights she had gathered through her work.

In recounting her story, she paused to smile, "I'm not used to selling myself like that, but on this occasion I did it to make the leap from 'member of the public' to so-called 'expert' status. I went through my testimony, and then one of the legislators started asking me questions" she said, marveling at the transformation.

"It was a bracing experience and I tried my best to give good answers to these questions." After this first encounter testifying before her state legislature, she is clearly primed for more—vowing, "I will do even better next time!"

Dr. Dixon's latest NIH/NIEHS funded research project, Measuring People's Engagement in Environmental Health, involves the development of a tool for

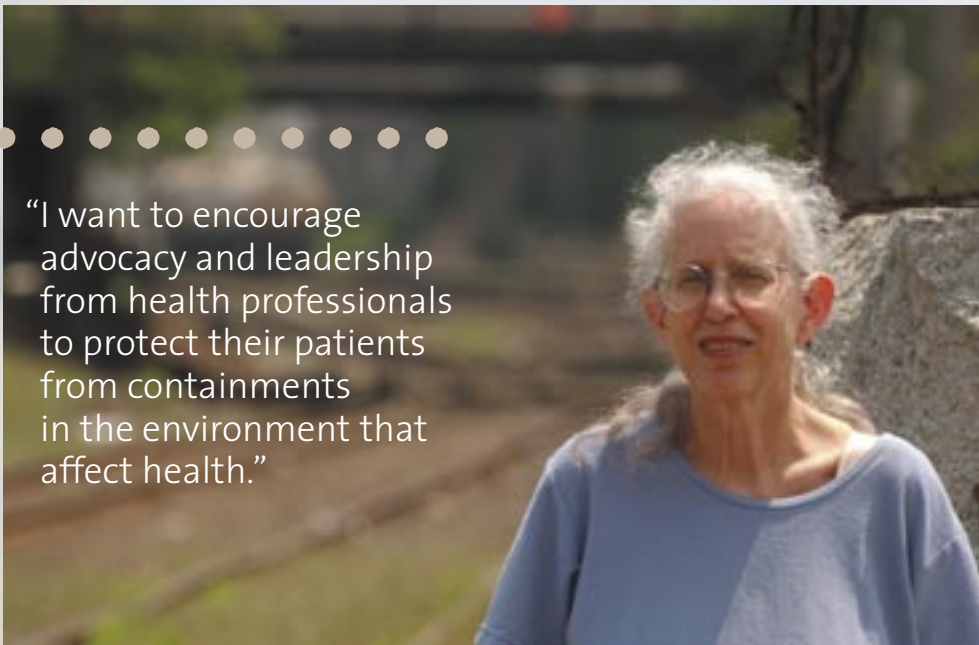
if there's already something bad in a neighborhood there's a tendency for there to be an underserved population living there. And then that community's lack of access to services and representation to protect their interests attracts additional projects that have further negative health impacts."

According to Dr. Dixon, environmental health hazards in this eastern New Haven neighborhood include a power plant which is "one of the biggest point sources of air pollution in the state." She said, "This is due to the sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide that comes out of the smokestacks there." Close to the power plant is a sewer sludge incinerator which, according to Dr. Dixon, is another significant source of pollutants.

"People are becoming concerned that the environment might affect their health and want information to help them do something about such concerns." According to Dr. Dixon, these include actions individuals can take—such as not smoking, or being around people who smoke—or actions that communities can take, like neighbors meeting to address concerns about pollution and talking to their local and federal representatives in government to seek protection in laws governing pollution.

Through her knowledge of research data collection and published studies, Dr. Dixon could see the connection between pollutants in the environment and the negative health effects that can be measured in the populations exposed. She recounted in her testimony to the lawmakers, "environmental pollution has known negative effects on a wide range of health conditions including; asthma, heart disease, cancer, birth outcomes, child development and mortality in both adults and infants."

Dr. Dixon also explained in her testimony that people who live in places with more air pollution experience more risk of health effects. For this reason, such legislation as the overburdened communities bill "would add a measure of protection that doesn't exist in cur-



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rent laws, so that existing levels of pollution can be taken into account as new sources of pollution are considered," she said as she concluded her testimony.

In describing her experience at the capital, Dr. Dixon said, "If healthcare professionals wish to influence people to take an active role in safeguarding their own health, both care providers and patients alike must first become aware of and engaged in such environmental questions as air pollution and how it impacts their health." Dr. Dixon con-

cludes, "I want to encourage advocacy and leadership from health professionals to protect their patients from containments in the environment that affect health."

By conducting research, analyzing data and now with her additional experience offering expert testimony to lawmakers, Dr. Dixon is doing some of the heavy lifting required to ease the burden on communities. "The goal of my work is to provide tools and inspire others to act as role models to promote better health outcomes," she said.

### Training Nurses for Leadership Roles in Health Care Policy and Management

Dr. Dixon's experience is a good example of the ability of individuals to inform policy makers on issues that impact quality of life in their community. However, Dr. Dixon recognizes that improving health care through policy change is a team effort. In preparing her testimony to the state legislature, she consulted with her colleague, Dr. Sally Cohen, who directs the Yale Center for Health Policy and Ethics. Dr. Cohen also directs YSN's new master's specialty in Nursing Management, Policy & Leadership. The program prepares RNs for leadership positions in health care delivery and health policy, focusing on patient safety and quality of care.

The format of the new program is responsive to the needs of today's practitioners and will prepare nurses to lead in an increasingly complex health care environment. It relies on innovative web-based methods combined with intensive monthly campus sessions, both of which are designed to be responsive to students' busy personal and professional lives. The curriculum includes courses in management, policy, leadership, organizational behavior, ethics, evidence-based practice and management, health care finance, and patient safety. Clinical placements are tailored to students' individual academic goals. Two and three year programs of study are available. The program satisfies the academic criteria for certification in nursing administration by the American Nurses' Credentialing Center.

Core faculty of the YSN Center for Health Policy and Ethics lead the specialty. Other YSN and Yale faculty, including Jane Dixon, are also contributing to the program. "This is a great opportunity for RNs to acquire the skills necessary for leadership and managerial positions in health care delivery systems, government, and other private and public settings," said Dr. Cohen. The first group of students will matriculate in January 2006.