



**ALAMEDA COUNTY HEALTH CARE SERVICES AGENCY  
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT**

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### **Testimony of**

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Before Assembly Committee on Labor and Employment and Assembly Select Committee on Ports**

### **The Intermodal Transportation System Revisited: Exploring Solutions for Port Drivers and Surrounding Communities - A Bay Area Perspective**

**Tuesday, October 16, 2007**

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Anthony Iton, Director of the Alameda County Department of Public Health and County Health Officer. I will keep my comments brief and concise. A copy of my written testimony will be submitted for the record.

Often the best public health and environmental solutions are, over the long term, also the best economic solutions. The Alameda County Public Health Department is committed to working in partnership with the West Oakland community, the Port of Oakland, the City of Oakland, the respective air quality management districts, local and state elected officials, and any other stakeholders who are interested in collaborating in good faith to find long-term and sustainable solutions to the issue of the deleterious local public health impacts of commercial shipping activities associated with the Port of Oakland. The reality of these impacts, however, is undeniable and stark. Residents living in the shadow of the Port of Oakland can expect to die, on average, more than a decade before residents of the Oakland Hills and, appallingly, this gap may be increasing. One of the underlying causes of this disturbingly large health disparity is the extremely high rates of respiratory disease in West Oakland, most notably asthma.

Asthma is a chronic disease that research now indicates can lead to irreversible changes in the architecture of the airways in the lungs. The irreversibility of these lung changes is one of the prime reasons that preventing asthma in children by reducing exposure to environmental triggers such as diesel is so critical to avoiding a life-long chronic disease. Decisions made today by policymakers can avoid consigning West Oakland children to a lifelong chronic disease. Asthma increases the work of breathing by causing inflammation, airway constriction and hyper responsiveness, and ultimately, in some people, permanent remodeling of the airways that is not reversible by current therapies. The increased work of breathing places a burden on the respiratory muscles and heart, and therefore can exacerbate heart disease producing heart failure and ultimately increase the likelihood of heart attacks, the number one killer of West Oakland residents.

- West Oakland residents have the highest rates of asthma hospitalization in the county – 2.3 times the Alameda County average.
- West Oakland children under five years of age have rates of emergency department visits nearly three times the county average.
- In 2005, West Oakland experienced an estimated 359 preventable respiratory illness hospitalizations, including an estimated 180 preventable asthma hospitalizations, in excess of county background levels.
- Two West Oakland elementary schools have asthma rates among 5<sup>th</sup> graders that are between 1.5 and 2 times the Oakland Unified School District average of 20% and among the highest in the district.
- Similarly, rates of other environmentally-linked diseases such as emphysema, congestive heart failure, heart attack, and disturbingly, lung cancer and other forms of cancer are disproportionately

higher in West Oakland than the rest of the county and burgeoning evidence suggests that the risk may be directly associated with living in proximity to port trucking routes.

- Diesel truck, port equipment and ship emissions directly impact the air quality in West Oakland. Many studies have shown that air pollution can trigger or worsen asthma and emphysema symptoms, and data from local studies support these findings.

The activities of the port also bring constant truck traffic, noise, air, and other pollution. Truck, car, bus, tanker, and other vehicular emissions are a major source of outdoor air pollution which contributes to indoor air pollution. Thus many West Oakland residents cannot escape the noxious diesel emission from the Port even in the safety of their homes.

As a majority independent contractor workforce composed primarily of immigrants, port truck drivers are effectively powerless to negotiate their rates with the large corporations that drive the shipping container industry. This powerlessness has resulted in poverty wages, no health benefits, no unemployment insurance, and no worker's compensation for this vital component of the Port's operations. Port truck drivers are left to depend on Alameda County clinics and Highland Hospital for health care for their families. Thus the fragile county healthcare safety net is effectively subsidizing some of the largest retail corporations in the world. Fairness would seem to indicate that this cost of doing business be borne more squarely by the industrial giants that benefit most directly from this commerce. In addition to limiting their access to necessary social goods such as high quality education and medical care, housing, childcare, nutritious foods, and safe and cleaner neighborhoods, the port truck drivers' poverty directly impacts their health and the health of the Port's neighbors. As independent contractors with limited wages, the port truck drivers often

can not afford to acquire newer lower emission trucks. As a result, they and the Port adjacent communities are exposed to hazardous levels of toxic diesel from older and obsolete truck technology every workday.

It is abundantly clear that the current port trucking system is contributing directly to an acute social and public health crisis in the neighborhoods adjacent to the port as well as among the port truck drivers themselves. While inequity in health outcomes is not new, and port trucking practices are unquestionably not the sole determinant, the long term health of the residents of West Oakland is nevertheless inextricably linked to, and disproportionately dependent upon, the environmental and social policies of their largest industrial neighbor, the Port of Oakland. These residents, predominantly low income African-American and Latino, deserve the same opportunity to live in a healthy environment as residents of the Oakland Hills.

To its credit, the Port of Oakland has taken the lead on mitigating sources of noxious air pollution attributable to its activities. The Port of Oakland administration frequently cites the fact that it is primarily a landlord. As a landlord, the Port has a duty to ensure that the activities of its tenants don't adversely affect the quality of life of other neighbors in West Oakland. Achieving environmental justice in West Oakland will require that the Port, and other local institutions, recognize their affirmative responsibility as neighbors to help the West Oakland community realize its vision for a healthy community. The Port, in its landlord role, will need to examine the relationship between policies and practices that effectively trap port truck drivers in penury and contribute, directly and indirectly, to the profoundly inequitable health outcomes in West Oakland.