

Benny Becker: Dr. Linda Birnbaum is the top US official for Environmental Health research. Here's how she explained her organizations goals.

Dr. Linda Birnbaum: Our mission for NIEHS is to discover how the environment affects people, in order to promote healthier lives.

Benny Becker: Birnbaum joined a panel, taking questions from the audience. And the discussion covered issues from obesity to water quality and from health care access to the impact of the coal industry. When the conversation turned to the tough economic situation here in the Central Appalachian coalfields, Birnbaum described how a stressful environment can cause long-term health issues in the region.

Birnbaum: Whenever there is economic collapse, you almost get a PTSD kind of syndrome – that's very hard to treat. And we also know that stress in the parents, before conception even, can pass on to your children actually in a genetic kind of sense – that can have long-term effects.

Benny Becker: The NIEHS funds a research center at the University of Kentucky, which studies environmental health issues throughout Kentucky and across the country. Birnbaum hopes that the issues raised at the forum will lead to new research that can improve the health of local communities.

For the Ohio Valley ReSource, I'm Benny Becker in Whitesburg, Kentucky.