

# CBCF Conference: Health, “The Dream” & Impeachment

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An estimated 10,000 people filled the Walter E. Washington Convention Center in Northwest Washington, DC over five days to hear vital issues facing African Americans and other minorities at the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation’s Annual Legislative Conference.

Organizers left no stone unturned during the 48th annual event that featured honorary co-chairs, Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey and Senator Kamala Harris of California. Texas Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee served as chairperson throughout the conference which tackled such vital topics as infant mortality, the opioid crisis, health disparities, criminal justice reform and much more.

Naturally, the midterm elections and the possibility of impeaching President Donald Trump commanded much attention. “We will walk through the storm together and we will be productive together,” said Jackson Lee during the opening news conference that featured the potential 2020 Democratic presidential ticket of Booker and Harris.

U.S. Surgeon General Jerome Adams sat for a fireside chat during a luncheon titled, “Protecting the Health, Safety and Security of African American Communities.” “This is about lifting up health for all,” Adams said.

Another health disparities forum highlighted Census Bureau statistics which revealed that 54.4 percent of Blacks have private health insurance compared to 75.8 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Further, the data revealed that more Blacks – 43.6 percent – relied on public health insurance like Medicaid, compared to 32.7 percent of whites. What’s more, statistics show that African Americans have the highest mortality rate of any racial and ethnic group for all cancers combined and for most major cancers.

This year’s conference theme, “The Dream Still Demands,” paid tribute to the legacy of pivotal American civil and social movements of the past 50 years, while maintaining a goal of uplifting present-day champions in the fight for racial equality, justice and freedom.

A panel discussion on criminal justice reform included Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin and three black gubernatorial candidates – Ben Jealous of Maryland, Stacey Abrams of Georgia and Andrew Gillum of Florida brought in overflow crowds at the convention center.

Rep. Maxine Waters of California, who along with Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina and Rep. Al Green of Texas each received the National Newspaper Publishers Association’s (NNPA) Leadership Award, helped to celebrate the hip-hop culture and stole the spotlight.

Joseph “Rev. Run” Simmons of Run-DMC fame also appeared on a panel to discuss diabetes while Florida Rep. Frederica Wilson sat in on a School to Prison forum.

The weeklong event also celebrated a power shift sweeping the nation: Black women are leading voter drives, running for office and winning. “We know that Black women have changed the world and continue to do that through our activism,” said Dr. Avis Jones-Deweever, a senior advisor for BWR Research & Resource Development.

“Young women are increasing their activism and there’s a 10 percent jump over the last year,” she said. “As always, our more mature sisters, almost two-thirds of us are active, as always.”

Dr. Elsie Scott said more women are pursuing other areas of elected office. “Since Trayvon Martin was murdered, we noticed more interest in prosecutors and more women running for prosecutors,” Scott said. “There are a number of Black women saying they don’t like the way they’re being prosecuted. What we find is women are winning in districts that are not predominately Black. If you look at the women of the Congressional Black Caucus, the majority of them now are in districts that are not majority Black,” she said.



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Trump, who has seen many of his inner circle recently plead guilty to criminal charges and might feel the walls closing in on him, was at the center of impeachment talk. In her typical fiery but still eloquent way, Waters spoke passionately about she and other Democrats mission to impeach the president – though, like many others, she never mentioned him by name but only referring to him as “Number 45.”

“My friend Jesse Jackson said if you fight, you can win. If you don’t fight, you will never know if you can win,” said Waters, who received an NNPA Leadership Award. For those who insist that Vice President Mike Pence might turn out as a worse Commander in Chief than Trump, Waters scoffed. “I say knock off the first, and go after the second,” as the sold-out crowd inside the grand ballroom of the Marriot Marquis roared its approval of her fiery award acceptance speech.

Green, the veteran civil rights advocate who’s serving his seventh term in Congress, picked up where Waters left off. “I promise that I have not given up on impeachment,” Green said. “We have a president who is not only unfit for the presidency, but a man who is unfit for any office in the United States of America.”

## NEURAL SUPERHIGHWAY CONNECTS GUT TO BRAIN IN BLINK OF AN EYE

If you’ve ever felt nauseous before an important presentation, or foggy after a big meal, then you know the power of the gut-brain connection.

Scientists now believe that a surprising array of conditions, from appetite disorders and obesity to arthritis and depression, may get their start in the gut. But it hasn’t been clear how messages in this so-called “second brain” spread from our stomachs to our cerebrum. For decades, researchers believed that hormones in the bloodstream were the indirect channel between the gut and the brain.

Recent research suggests the lines of communication behind that “gut feeling” is more direct and speedy than a diffusion of hormones. Using a rabies virus jacked up with green fluorescence, Duke researchers traced a signal as it traveled from the intestines to the brainstem of mice. They were shocked to see the signal cross a single synapse in under 100 milliseconds -- that’s faster than the blink of an eye.

“Scientists talk about appetite in terms of minutes to hours. Here we are talking about seconds,” said Diego Bohórquez, Ph.D., senior author of the study and assistant professor of medicine at Duke University School of Medicine. “That has profound implications for our understanding of appetite. Many of the appetite suppressants that have been developed target slow-acting hormones, not fast-acting synapses. And that’s probably why most of them have failed.”

The research appears Sept. 21 in the journal *Science*.

Your brain takes in information from all five senses -- touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste -- through electrical signals, which travel along long nerve fibers that lie beneath your skin and muscle like fiber optic cables. These signals move fast, which is why the scent of freshly baked cookies seems to hit you the moment you open a door.

Though the gut is just as important a sensory organ as your eyes and ears -- after all, knowing when your stomach is in need of a fill-up is key to survival -- scientists thought it delivered its messages by a multi-step, somewhat indirect process. Nutrients in your gut, the thinking went, stimulated the release of hormones, which entered the bloodstream minutes to hours after eating, eventually exerting their effects on the brain.

They were partly right. That tryptophan in your turkey dinner is notorious for its transformation into serotonin, the brain chemical that makes you feel sleepy.

But Bohórquez suspected the brain had a way of perceiving cues from the gut more quickly. He noticed that the sensory cells lining the gut shared many of the same characteristics as their cousins on the tongue and in the nose. In 2015, he published a landmark study in the *Journal of Clinical Investigation* showing that these gut cells contained nerve endings or synapses, suggesting that they might tap into some kind of neural circuitry.

In this study, Bohórquez and his team set out to map that circuitry. First, postdoctoral fellow Maya Kaelberer pumped a rabies virus carrying a green fluorescent tag into the stomachs of mice. She saw that the virus had labeled the vagus nerve before landing in the brainstem, showing her there was a direct circuit.

Next, Kaelberer recreated the gut-brain neural circuit by growing sensory gut cells of mice in the same dish with vagal neurons. She saw the neurons crawl along the surface of the dish to connect to the gut cells and begin to fire signals. When the research team added sugar to the mix, the firing rate sped up. Kaelberer measured how fast the information from sugar in the gut was communicated and was shocked to find it was on the order of milliseconds.

That finding suggested that a neurotransmitter like glutamate -- which is involved in conveying other senses like smell and taste -- might act as the messenger. Sure enough, when the researchers blocked the release of glutamate in the sensory gut cells, the messages were silenced.

Bohórquez has data that suggests the structure and function of this circuit will be the same in humans.

“We think these findings are going to be the biological basis of a new sense,” Bohórquez said. “One that serves as the entry point for how the brain knows when the stomach is full of food and calories. It brings legitimacy to idea of the ‘gut feeling’ as a sixth sense.”

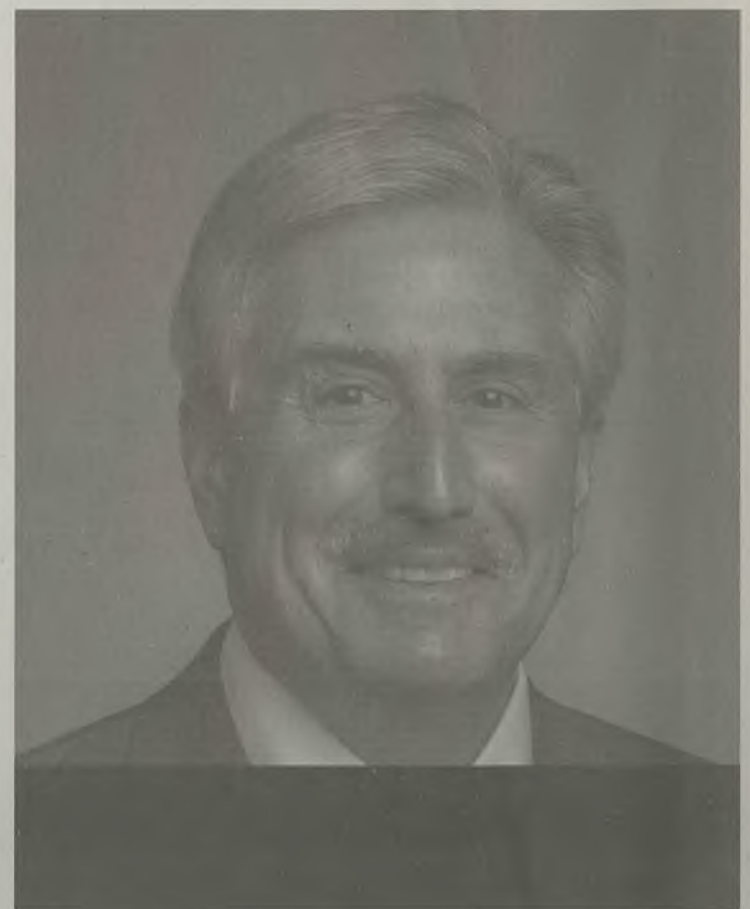
In the future, Bohórquez and his team are interested in figuring out how this new sense can discern the type of nutrients and caloric value of the foods we eat. +--

## NCCU Research Director Available to Comment on Research Preparations for Hurricane Florence

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) research director Hernan Navarro, Ph.D., is available to speak to the media regarding best practices for protecting sensitive lab equipment and research in preparation for hurricanes and other powerful storms.

Navarro, who is director of NCCU’s Biomanufacturing Research Institute and Technology Enterprise (BRITE), provides leadership and supervision of the research institute and its two dozen faculty members as they conduct drug-discovery and biomanufacturing research related to diseases such as diabetes, cancer, neurodegenerative diseases and other metabolic disorders. BRITE also owns a 475,000 chemical compound library – the largest academic collection in the United States.

Navarro has nearly 30 years of research experience in the corporate sector having previously served as chief scientist at RTI International’s Center for Drug Discovery in



DR. NAVARRO

Research Triangle Park. He has also published more than 100 works of research and holds a number of patents. Navarro earned a Bachelor of Science degree in botany from Duke University in 1981 and a doctorate in anatomy from the University of K

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