

# Speaking out for accurate information on fracking

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As Pennsylvania experiences a natural gas boom, the related industry of fracking has generated concerns about environmental and health issues. In fracking (hydraulic fracturing), rock deep in the earth is fractured by a hydraulically pressurized liquid to stimulate natural gas flow from the well.

Ruth A. McDermott-Levy '96 MSN, MPH, '08 PhD, RN, associate professor and the director of the College of Nursing's Center for Global and Public Health, is a public and community health specialist. She has spoken in favor of improving the state Department of Health's practices in sharing safety information with the public and nurses who live in the areas where natural gas is being extracted. She has ties to upstate

Pennsylvania, where fracking is occurring, having earned her BSN at Wilkes University in Wilkes-Barre.

Through editorials and invited testimony at State Senate hearings, Dr. McDermott-Levy is teaching legislators, the public and health professionals about these environmental and [health issues](#). In 2014, she testified at the State Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing, held at King's College in Wilkes-Barre, on the subject of tracking, reporting and acting on public-health concerns related to [natural gas drilling](#). Health-care providers need to know the chemical composition of these sometimes dangerous fracking fluids so they can better care for patients and share cases with colleagues, Dr. McDermott-Levy testified. The Department of Health must develop a health registry that is accessible to the public, she urged, so that people can make informed decisions about exposure risks and the steps to take to protect their health and the health of their families.

"Fracking is a complex issue and it is taking place in close proximity to where people live. To adequately address the health impacts in Pennsylvania we need accurate, timely information that can be found in a publicly accessible health registry," explains Dr. McDermott-Levy.

Since January, Dr. McDermott-Levy has served as secretary of the Board of Directors of the Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project (EHP). A nonprofit environmental health organization, EHP was created to assist and support Washington County residents who believe their health has been, or could be, impacted by natural gas drilling activities. EHP plans on expanding its work across the state and nationally as unconventional natural gas and oil extraction advances throughout the country. Dr. McDermott-Levy is also a founding member of the recently organized PA Health Professionals for a Livable Future, a coalition of health professions, to put health in the forefront in policies related to the state's natural gas resources. The coalition includes the

Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, PennEnvironment, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Service Employees International Union - Healthcare and Southwest Pennsylvania Environmental Health Project.

While researching the health concerns of local communities, Dr. McDermott-Levy also mentors research assistant Victoria Garcia '09 CLAS, a 2015 graduate of Villanova's Nursing BSN program. As an undergraduate biology major at Villanova, Garcia completed her senior thesis in a marine ecology lab on campus, fieldwork in the Galápagos Islands during a study abroad semester and a National Science Foundation research experience in the Chesapeake Bay area. Garcia passed her RN licensing examination and is now working as a staff nurse at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Other Villanova students also have been conducting fieldwork with faculty on the effects of fracking. Dr. McDermott-Levy's research study, "Perceived Health Concerns and Learning Needs of Northeast Pennsylvania Communities," is the seed for a potentially larger scope of work. Steven T. Goldsmith, PhD, and Nathaniel B. Weston, PhD, professors in Villanova's Department of Geography and the Environment, have been studying water quality in the streams in North-Central Pennsylvania's [natural gas](#) extraction areas. Dr. McDermott-Levy has been in conversations with them to collaborate eventually in a larger study related to fracking in the region.

"This is what public health nurses do—advocate for the health of a population," notes Dr. McDermott-Levy.

Provided by Villanova University

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