The Philippine Consulate General, Philippine Department of Health (DOH) and Zuellig Family Foundation (ZFF), together with partner organizations UP Medical Alumni Society of America (UPMASA), Philippine Nurses Association (PNAA) and UP Alumni Association of New Jersey, co-hosted a forum on *Public Health in the Philippines: Progress and Challenges* on 13 November 2013 at the Philippine Center.

About 115 people came to the event, mostly doctors, nurses, public health students, members of groups conducting medical missions to the Philippines, and representatives of universities. The UNDP also sent a program specialist to the event.

The speakers at the forum included Ambassador Roberto R. Romulo, Chairman of ZFF, Dr. Esperanza Cabral, ZFF Trustee who was also former Secretary of Health and former Secretary of Social Welfare and Development, Mr. Ernesto Garilao, ZFF President and former Secretary of Agrarian Reform, and Mr. Daniel Zuellig, ZFF Trustee. Health Secretary Enrique Ona was
supposed to keynote the forum but he was unable to travel to the US to attend to the emergency needs in the areas affected by super typhoon Yolanda. His presentation was delivered by Dr. Cabral.

In his welcome remarks, Consul General Mario De Leon said “This forum is a good venue for learning the current developments in the Philippine public health sector, the challenges it faces, and the assistance that the Filipino American community - especially those in the medical and health profession - can do as a way of giving back to the country. This is also an opportune time to discuss the health services needs of the communities devastated by the super typhoon Yolanda.”

Ambassador Romulo shared how the Zuellig family started its pharmaceutical business in the Philippines and its growth into an international and diversified company. ZFF was set up to undertake the company's corporate responsibility and it has forged partnership with international organizations, such as the United Nations Population Fund, USAID and UNICEF. As part of its assistance to the typhoon victims, ZFF agreed to be the conduit for the donations that the US-Philippine Society will raise from its typhoon relief fund drive.

Speaking on behalf of Secretary Ona, Dr. Cabral discussed the current public health situation in the Philippines. According to her, there are 1,233 areas in the Philippines that are classified as priority areas of the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) because these are the places where the government is falling behind in terms of achieving UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG) No. 5 (improving maternal health). Part of the reason for this is the insufficient government budget that cannot provide sufficient medical care to the increasing population.

She also discussed the success of ZFF’s Health Change Model, a program that trains local health leaders to become more responsive to the health needs of their communities. DOH became interested in the program and decided to partner with ZFF so the latter could train and monitor the DOH’s head office and regional staff, and help strengthen DOH’s health leadership and service delivery at the national and local levels.

For her own presentation, Dr. Cabral mentioned the state of the reproductive health in the Philippines. She cited these statistics - 33,000 children die in the first month of life; 5.9 million women are at risk of pregnancy; 1 million women have unwanted or mistimed births; and 15,000 cases of HIV/AIDS. She proposed that the three-pronged strategy - involving a) planned families; b) facility-based delivery by skilled personnel and emergency obstetric; and c) initial care - can help address the challenges of reproductive health.

Mr. Garilao spoke about the Health Leadership and Governance joint program of DOH and ZFF wherein ZFF trains DOH’s various bureaus and regional Centers for Health Development (CHDs) to help them acquire the necessary leadership and governance skills. The aim is to create an immediate impact on achieving the health MDGs by improving local health systems in 609 priority municipalities with the support of local government officials. He cited the lesson derived from ZFF Health Change Model which validates that if the poor have better access to healthcare programs and services, better health outcomes will be achieved.

Ambassador Romulo encouraged the audience to consider supporting projects that will contribute to the development of Philippine public health sector and the country's attainment of the MDGs. END.