

## Center for American Progress



## A Moral Prescription

## Faith Community Backs Progressive Proposals for Health

By **Lindsay Barrett** | August 28, 2008

"Catholic Social Teaching reminds us the right to healthcare flows from the sanctity of human life and the dignity that belongs to each person because we are created in God's image," explains Chris Korzen, Executive Director of **Catholics United**, about the moral obligation of the faith community to advocate for better health care in America.

This obligation drove Catholics United to create radio ads criticizing 13 "pro-life" congressional representatives who voted against reauthorizing the State Children's Health Insurance Program in 2007. SCHIP provides health insurance coverage for children in families with incomes too high to qualify for coverage under Medicaid, but who lack access to affordable private health insurance coverage.

The Catholics United ad was sharp and to the point. "I believe that protecting the lives of our children must be our nation's top moral priority," says a pro-life mother. "That's why I'm concerned that Congressman [X] says he's pro-life but votes against health care for poor children. That's not pro-life. That's not pro-family."

Communities of faith have long been advocates for health care reform that would make health care more accessible and affordable to all Americans, especially the low-income and vulnerable. They have advocated for a variety of proposals from SCHIP to universal health care. Their actions are driven by the moral belief that all human beings possess innate worth and dignity. Faith communities also believe in a shared commitment to the common good, promoting policies that benefit all humanity. These moral obligations inspire people of faith to advocate for legislation that ensures affordable and accessible health care.

Many faith groups worked for the reauthorization of SCHIP in 2007, including the **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**, which has long been known for its efforts on health care reform. Among USCCB's activities were action alerts urging letter-writing campaigns to support SCHIP legislation.

According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, approximately 46 million Americans have no health insurance. Roughly one-sixth of that number—approximately 8 million—are children. Such a reality is a moral outrage. **Jewish Council for Public Affairs** Executive Director Rabbi Steve Gutow says, "No religious tradition rests easily while people are hungry and poor.... Our streets are filled with the tragedy of young and old needing food and health care. This is not okay!"

Although President George W. Bush vetoed SCHIP reauthorization legislation twice, faith groups like Catholics United, USCCB, and others contributed significantly to the push that helped the bill pass Congress by framing SCHIP as a moral issue and highlighting the contradictory religious rhetoric and behavior of many elected officials. The efforts also convinced some representatives, such as Rep. Gene Taylor (D-MS), to change position and vote in favor of SCHIP reauthorization.

Virtually every mainline Protestant denomination publically supports health care reform that ensures accessibility and affordability for all Americans, including the **American Baptist Churches**, **Episcopal Church (USA)**, **Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**, **Presbyterian Church (USA)**, **United Church of Christ**, **United Methodist Church**, and others. Also on record supporting health care reform are the **United States Conference of Catholic Bishops** and the **Central Conference of American Rabbis**, which was an early supporter, passing its resolution in 1976.

The Episcopalian and Presbyterian statements advocate specific legislation regarding Medicaid, Medicare, and the Children's Health Insurance Program, while other denominational statements are more general, urging universal access based on an ecumenical commitment to the common good. The statements also urge members to become active with faith-based community and lobbying organizations.

**Faithful Reform in Health Care**, or FRHC, a recently formed organization based in Cleveland, is one such faith-based community group. Last September, FRHC sent a petition to Congress advocating reauthorization of SCHIP. The petition had over 200 individualsignatories and followed the publication of "Working for Health Care for All—Beginning With Children," a collaboration of over 60 organizations. The study, published in March 2007, examines SCHIP and perceived barriers to communities of faith becoming involved in health care reform. It concludes with recommendations for reframing the health care debate from economic concerns to moral considerations. Executive Director Linda Walling says, "I think the faith community can promote the moral framework by talking about community and the common good and equitable sharing of resources and the sacredness of all of life."

SCHIP is not the only federal legislation receiving attention from faith communities. Last spring the Jewish Council for Public Affairs, JCPA, an advocacy organization founded in 1944, lobbied for **S. 2819**, "The Economic Recovery in Health Care Act of 2008," which would provide a moratorium on Medicaid cuts proposed by the administration and give \$12 billion in financial relief to states for health care services for the needy and vulnerable. These ideas were incorporated into the "Supplemental Appropriations Act" and signed into law in June. The moratorium on cuts has been extended until April 1, 2009.

Faith groups are also working for state health care reform. **PICO National Network** is an organization of over 1,000 religious congregations in 150 cities, which has been working for 36 years to address housing, education, and health care disparities. In February 2007, an affiliate in Colorado lobbied state lawmakers on behalf of **SB 08-161**, which would expand health coverage to 55,000 uninsured children and reduce barriers to families obtaining health insurance. The efforts paid off in June when Governor Bill Ritter Jr. signed the bill into law. PICO's California office supports **SB 840**, California legislation that would enact single-payer health coverage, wherein the state provides health care for all citizens. The legislation is currently on the assembly floor.

**Families USA**, a secular organization, worked with communities of faith in Massachusetts to mobilize advocates of 2006 landmark legislation that required all adult state residents to have health insurance by December 31, 2007. As of March, over 350,000 previously uninsured Massachusetts citizens had obtained health insurance. Families USA also maintains the **Center for Faith-Based Resources**, which provides discussion guides, sample bulletins, action strategies, and other tools for communities of faith working for health care reform.

Families USA is one of several national partner organizations for the annual "Cover the Uninsured Week." The week brings Christian, Muslim, and Jewish organizations together with secular organizations to work toward health care reform. More than 1,000 local activities took place during this year's Cover the Uninsured Week, including events providing insurance enrollment opportunities for eligible families.

Not all faith group activity focuses exclusively on state or federal legislation. For example, the **United Methodist Health Ministry Fund**, serving the state of Kansas since 1986, has given approximately \$50 million in grants to improve health care services and delivery, including the establishment of 18 primary care dental clinics. The fund and its partners have also worked for the re-establishment of the **Office of Oral Health** at the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, which "seeks to increase awareness regarding the importance of oral health and improve oral health status by providing education, consultation and training." In 2000 the fund gave financial support to a dental clinic and oral health program established by the United Methodist Western Kansas Mexican-American Ministries. Fund President Kim Moore says, "It is obvious that the safety net and philanthropy cannot solve the health care access problem. The scale of the problem requires responsible government intervention."

Moral concern drove abolitionists, civil rights leaders, and others to call their government to account. As the government continues to consider health care reform, there is no doubt that the same faith communities will continue to be at the forefront of the movement.

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