

September 15, 2008

FOCUS on affordable health care

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 Published: 08.27.08

When Nilda Santana, mother of three and parishioner of Good Shepherd Parish in Orlando, was trying to decide how to budget health insurance for herself and her children on her salary, she discovered, "I could not afford the \$600-a-month coverage that would be needed."

So she applied for the state's alternative for working families, KidCare. Her proficiency in the English language and computer skills should have made the application process easier, but it didn't. It proved to be frustrating as she had to complete and fax paperwork several times because KidCare kept reporting "forms are missing."

It took more than six months to get all three of her children enrolled. A week after receiving confirmation of their health insurance, KidCare sent a notification canceling their coverage. The mistake was corrected, but it prompted Santana to take action. She wondered what other families must be experiencing if she was having this much difficulty. She took her story to an interfaith community action group known as FOCUS.

FOCUS, Federation of Congregations United to Serve, is a community organizing effort among Orange County churches addressing health care and other issues, and has been funded by the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, the U.S. Bishops' domestic anti-poverty initiative. FOCUS is one of hundreds of community organizing efforts across the United States that achieves positive change in its community by listening to the needs of low-income working people such as Santana, and works to change the structures that keep families powerless.

During one of its listening campaigns, FOCUS found many parents were struggling with the KidCare enrollment process, as well as dealing with lapses in their coverage. FOCUS did extensive research, asked local legislators to make KidCare reform a priority, coordinated a letter-writing campaign to get the community's voice heard in Tallahassee and held a press conference on the steps of the Capitol.

Collaboration is a key component to acquiring information on health care insurance. As Santana became more of a leader in FOCUS through her parish, she and others turned to other Catholic Campaign for Human Development-funded groups in the central Florida area, such as Congregations for Community Action, for information on the trail of federally funded health care through the State Children's Health Insurance Program, or SCHIP. They discovered that for Florida to receive more national funding through SCHIP, KidCare needs to show better results proving its efficacy in providing viable health insurance to Florida's children.

While there is still room for improvement in the KidCare program, FOCUS was able to initiate changes making the application and enrollment process smoother, and between fall 2007 and spring 2008, an additional \$14.1 million was allocated to Florida, enabling coverage for 42,000 more children. KidCare is on the agenda again for the next legislative session. The 2008 State Candidate Questionnaire, which may be viewed at www.informedcatholicvoter.com, placed KidCare funding as a priority for consideration by Florida Senate and House candidates.

Recently, during a legislative visit with Democratic state Sen. Gary Siplin, St. Andrew parishioner and FOCUS member Joan Healy advocated strongly to make KidCare reform a priority next session. Healy asked, "What more can we do? We've already been up to Tallahassee several times. We've shown it's a priority for us. Why isn't it a priority for our legislators?"

Siplin seemed pleasantly surprised by her passionate comments and advised targeting the leadership in the House and Senate as a possible strategy to get beyond political posturing. While this issue is still critical to Florida's children, Santana and other mothers can breathe a little easier for the moment because FOCUS and others in the community are determined in their mission to continue improving access to KidCare.

Dowd is an intern in the Diocese of Orlando Office of Advocacy and Justice.

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