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*From The Morning Call*

# Katrina shows need to keep Medicaid safety net whole

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Religious and civic leaders from Allentown and other cities across the country recently went to Washington, D.C., with clergy from Louisiana to help expand health coverage for every child in America, including those who lost everything in Katrina. Congregations United for Neighborhood Action of Allentown is joining with 1,000 religious congregations as part of a national network to ask Congress to put aside Medicaid cuts that could result in as many as 1.5 million low-income children losing health insurance. As the nation faces an unprecedented public health crisis Congress should focus on increasing, not decreasing health-care access.

On Aug. 30, as water flooded New Orleans, a city where 40 percent of children lived in poverty, the U.S. Census Bureau announced that the number of uninsured in America had topped 45 million, including 8.3 million children. Just as Americans have responded to Katrina with an outpouring of compassion, more than two out of three people in our country say that the government needs to insure that every family has health coverage. It is common sense that a sick child should be able to see a pediatrician for an ear infection rather than end up hearing impaired, have a bone set properly rather than end up disabled for life.

Our federation of faith communities welcomed President Bush's "Cover the Kids" initiative to work with faith-based organizations to enroll millions of low-income children in health insurance. On the campaign trail, Mr. Bush repeatedly said, "We will not allow a lack of attention or information to stand between these children and the health care they need." Yet, despite the president's inspirational words, we see Congress moving backward, not forward, on the national goal of covering more children.

Before Katrina struck, Congress was poised to make \$10 billion in cuts to the Medicaid program, the primary source of health care for 25 million poor children and 14 million low-income working parents. The proposed cuts include allowing states to charge six million low-income children new access fees (up to 5 percent and in some cases 7.5 percent of a family's income) that would reduce their enrollment and curtail their use of medical care.

Our national network has released a report, "Do No Harm," that estimates that the changes to Medicaid being considered by Congress would result in between 500,000 and 1.5 million children losing health coverage. The estimate is based on research findings that access fees reduce participation by low-income families in health insurance. Depending on how many states decided to charge new access fees, the number of uninsured children in the country would increase from between 6 to 18 percent, according to our research.

As a network representing more than one million families and 1,000 religious congregations, we believe that it is hypocritical for Congress to place obstacles between low-income children and families and the coverage and care they need.

Our organization is asking U.S. Rep. Charles Dent and other members of Congress to drop planned cuts to Medicaid that would hurt children and families, and to instead pass the president's Cover the Kids initiative. We support our sister organizations in Louisiana in calling for Congress to take up comprehensive family relief legislation that includes Medicaid eligibility for displaced families, simplified enrollment and full federal funding to address a mounting public health crisis in the South.

For many families who lost their homes, schools, churches and livelihoods, health insurance is one of the few things they have left. Others face grave physical and mental health dangers without health coverage. With bodies still being recovered in the flooded streets of New Orleans and communities across the country taking in families, it is good that Congress has put off for now action on cutting the Medicaid program, but it will be taken up again. The catastrophic failure to protect families before and after Katrina struck shows how much our lives depend on a strong safety net. Now is a time for national unity and soul searching about our priorities — not a time for making it harder for low-income children and families to get the health care they need.

The Rev. David Brown is pastor of Dubbs Memorial United Church of Christ in Allentown and is chair of the CUNA (Churches United for Neighborhood Action) Sponsoring Committee.

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