

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

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Americans Want Comprehensive Health Coverage Working Group Reports But Fails to Answer

The Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement, and Modernization Act of 2003 established the Citizens' Health Care Working Group to collect and analyze information about what the American people want in a health care system. In its September 27 report the Working Group found, unsurprisingly, that the American people want:

- A health care system that works for everyone
- Access to health care, especially with the rising costs of care and insurance
- Wasted money to be better allocated to ensure access to quality health care for everyone
- Health coverage available when it is needed without complicated administrative barriers and where it is needed, in communities.

Disappointingly, the recommendations of the Working Group fell far short of the single payer system that would give the American people what we want and need.

Our colleagues at Physicians for a National Health Plan (www.pnhp.org) have prepared the following template for single payer advocates to modify and submit to local newspapers under your own names. In reading it, note that this version is specific to Pennsylvania, but see the instructions in the "ACTION" section below.

SAMPLE OP-ED

This past April, a government-sponsored task force came to **Philadelphia** to hear citizens, advice on how to improve our distressed health care system. As in nearly all the states they visited, **Pennsylvanians** overwhelmingly said they wanted high-quality, cost-effective health care funded through a national health program. But there was a problem: such a recommendation would threaten the profits of powerful interests or huge insurance and drug companies known more for their generosity with political contributions than for their consideration for the public interest.

So in its final report issued on Sept. 27, the Citizens Health Care Working Group simply ignored the citizens. Nevertheless, as a **physician who practices in Springfield**, I realize just as well as my fellow **Pennsylvanians** that a national health system is the only solution for our state and our nation.

The Working Group, a panel of health care experts appointed by the U.S. Comptroller General, was created by Congress in 2003. The group was given a mandate to travel the country, listen to citizens' advice for reform, and translate their wishes into recommendations for Congress. Wherever they went, ordinary citizens (patients, doctors, business owners, workers) consistently asked for national health insurance. In fact, the group's own data show attendees favored a national health program over any other option by an average of 3 to 1. Of the 29 meetings surveyed, attendees picked the creation of a national program as their top choice at 25 of them. **Philadelphians** ranked national health insurance first when given 10 possible reforms. From Los Angeles to Memphis to New York, the message was the same: replace our broken system with public coverage for everyone.

Yet the final recommendations that the Working Group reported to Congress make no mention of the national health program that the citizens asked for. Instead, they offer only half-measures, tinkering around the edges of our broken system while leaving the fundamentally flawed private insurance structure untouched. Unfortunately for all those families currently facing a choice between utility payments and medical bills, the Working Group's best suggestion is to ask taxpayers to help them buy deficient insurance products that offer little or no protection when serious illness strikes. As for finding a way to define, provide and pay for good health benefits for all Americans, the Working Group decided to put that off until later.

As a physician, it is easy to see why a national health program enjoyed such overwhelming public support. One in **ten Pennsylvanians (1.3 million)** lacked health insurance in 2005. Medical care is increasingly rationed based on the ability to pay: ever larger numbers report going without needed care or medications due to costs, and more than 18,000 Americans die needlessly each year from lack of insurance coverage. Even for those rich or healthy enough to afford coverage, the private policies offered today are so riddled with exclusions, co-payments, and high deductibles that even a minor illness can threaten a family with financial ruin. Indeed, Harvard University researchers found that of the **estimated 29,000 Pennsylvanians** bankrupted by illness and medical bills in 2004, **75 percent** had insurance when they got sick.

The support that the Working Group found for a national health program (but chose to ignore) certainly reflects this growing awareness that insurance coverage no longer guarantees access to care or protection from medical debt. By contrast, a national health insurance system such as the one proposed by Physicians for a National Health Program (www.pnhp.org) could provide comprehensive coverage for everyone without costing us any more than we are already spending.

Replacing private insurance companies with a single public payer, Improved Medicare for All, in essence would save more than \$300 billion annually by eliminating insurers, wasteful, duplicative paperwork and exorbitant executive salaries. This money currently squandered on insurer bureaucracies whose primary purpose is to fight claims and deny care is enough to cover every American for all medically necessary services. Patients would

regain full choice of doctor and hospital, and physicians would be unleashed from corporate dictates over patient care.

The proposals of the Working Group offer nothing but a continuation of business as usual: insurance and drug firms reap kingly profits while millions go without needed care. Americans know that only national health insurance can provide the health security they need. Unfortunately, the Citizens Health Care Working Group has made it clear that we will have to look beyond our current elected officials to make our voices heard.

ACTION

- Adapt the Op-Ed as you see fit, and submit it to your local newspaper. If you live in a state where the Working Group held hearings (AR, AZ, CA, CO, FL, GA, IA, IN, KY, LA, MI, MO, MS, MT, NC, ND, NH, NM, NV, NY, OH, OK, OR, PA, RI, SD, TN, TX, UT, WA, or WI) Nick Skala at nick@pnhp.org will gladly provide you with the relevant numbers for your State AND your newspaper's instructions for submission. If you already know which paper you'd like to submit to, please indicate it in your e-mail to Nick.
- As the national elections near, attend forums and ask candidates for the House or Senate if they will support real reform of the health care system. Remind them that health care is a human right that our government must advance.
- To learn more, visit the National Health Care for the Homeless Council's single payer page at <http://www.nhchc.org/singlepayer.html> or Physicians for a National Health Plan at <http://www.pnhp.org>

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