

Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council

P.O. Box 60427
Nashville, TN 37206-0427

E-mail: council@nhchc.org
Website: www.nhchc.org

Telephone 615/226-2292
Fax 615/226-1656

Vol. XIV No. 2

3/11/09

Congressional Support Needed!

Expand Community Health Centers and the National Health Service Corps

In recognition of the growing need for primary health care services in the United States, Members of Congress are supportive of strengthening and expanding community health centers. On February 26, Senator Bernie Sanders (I-VT) introduced the *Access for All America Act*. This legislation would quadruple the amount of funding for community health centers and increase funding for the National Health Services Corps to \$1 billion over five years. A massive unmet need remains for health center resources, particularly during the current recession, despite years of incremental expansion through the Health Center Growth Initiative. The National Health Care for the Homeless Council calls upon *Mobilizer* readers to contact their Members of Congress about the need for comprehensive health care reform, including the expansion of health centers and the National Health Service Corps.

The Case for Safety Net Services

Federally-Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs) consistently have proven their effectiveness in delivering comprehensive medical care to underserved populations. Though health centers currently serve 18 million people annually, at least 56 million Americans—both insured and uninsured—face inadequate access to primary care due to a shortage of physicians and other providers. Without sufficient access to care, the health problems of the insured and underinsured are exacerbated, resulting in costly treatment, medical complications, and even premature death.

The deteriorating economy leaves more Americans unemployed, at risk of homelessness, and in need of health services. According to the Department of Labor, unemployment jumped to 7.6% in January 2009, the highest in 14 years. With continued increases, more Americans are expected to lose health coverage.

Approximately 750,000 individuals known to be homeless obtain their primary health care from community health centers each year – a fraction of the 3.5 million individuals thought to experience homelessness annually. In 2007, 70% of clients served by Health Care for the Homeless projects were uninsured. Since then, HCH projects are reporting higher numbers of patient encounters and increased numbers of patients whom clinics must turn away.

Health Centers – *Part of the Singular Solution*

The most effective way to address the need for primary health care services is to guarantee access to comprehensive, quality, affordable health insurance for all Americans through a single payer financing mechanism; however, until this type of reform is realized, we must continue to provide a health care safety net for those lacking adequate access to care. In 2008, Congress unanimously reauthorized the Consolidated Health Center program for five years and appropriated \$2 billion for Community Health Centers, including \$174 million for Health Care for the Homeless projects. Last night, Congress passed the Fiscal Year 2009 budget which appropriates \$2.2 billion for community health centers, including \$56 million in base grant adjustments for existing health centers. The HCH program will receive a total of approximately \$191 million. The National Health Service Corps, a program upon which HCH projects rely to recruit medical professionals, will see funding increase to \$11 million, a well-needed adjustment not seen for several years.

The Access for All America Act

The *Access for All America Act* (S. 486), introduced by Senator Sanders, strives “to achieve access to comprehensive primary health care services for all Americans and to reform the organization of primary care delivery through an expansion of the Community Health Center and National Health Service Corps programs.” This bill authorizes spending increases over five years for FQHCs and the National Health Service Corps; these increases are designed to reach a total of \$8 billion per year for FQHCs and \$1 billion per year for NHSC by the fifth year of expansion. A companion bill has been introduced in the House by Representative Jim Clyburn (D-SC), though a bill number has not yet been assigned. The Senate version of this bill has 22 cosponsors. Unfortunately, neither bill has yet attracted bi-partisan support.

ACTION:

- **To read the bill**, go to the Thomas website at www.thomas.gov and search the bill number, S.486.
- **Call your Senators and ask them to cosponsor S. 486**, the Access for All America Act. Tell them that the bill will expand community health centers and the National Health Service Corps. Explain the types of services you provide and the importance of the NHSC program. To find your Senators go to www.senate.gov or call the Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121. If your Senator(s) are cosponsors of the bill, call and thank them for their support.

Senate cosponsors:

Mark Begich (AK)	Barbara Boxer (CA)
Ronald Burris (IL)	Sherrod Brown (OH)
Jeff Bingaman (NM)	Bob Casey (PA)
Ben Cardin (MD)	Richard Durbin (IL)
Tom Harkin (IA)	Daniel Inouye (HI)
Tim Johnson (SD)	Edward Kennedy (MA)

John Kerry (MA)
Robert Menendez (NJ)
Barbara Mikulski (MD)
Debbie Stabenow (MI)
Ron Wyden (OR)

Patrick Leahy (VT)
Jeff Merkley (OR)
Charles Schumer (NY)
Jon Tester (MT)
Sheldon Whitehouse (RI)

- **Contact your Representative and urge her or him to cosponsor the ‘Access for All America Act.’** To find your Representative go to www.house.gov or call the Capitol Switchboard.
- **For more information** contact the National Council’s Health Policy Organizer, Adrienne Breidenstine, at abreidenstine@hchmd.org or 443-703-1337.

SUBSCRIBE TO THE HEALTH CARE FOR THE HOMELESS MOBILIZER

\$15 per year by fax, free by e-mail.

Please pass this on to your colleagues, clients, and Board of Directors.