

# Health Care for the Homeless Mobilizer

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## Healing a Nation

### *Economic Solutions through Health Care Reform*

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council congratulates President-Elect Obama and all new and returning members of Congress following this month's historic election. These individuals will take office in a troubled era marked by a sinking economy, a broken health care system, an affordable housing crisis, unfavorable military endeavors, and fractured relationships overseas. The incoming Administration already has drafted an ambitious public policy agenda centered upon the economy and foreign policy. And Congress returned this week for a "lame duck" session to develop a second economic stimulus package possibly to include unemployment benefits, food stamps, and additional Medicaid assistance for states. When developing a plan for the economy, elected officials must consider the extent to which a fractured health care system leads to overall insecurity for a growing number of Americans. Any plan to stabilize the economy for the long term must include health care reform. The National Council encourages *Mobilizer* readers to communicate this message to President-Elect Obama and your incoming Congressional representatives.

### **The Economy and Health Care Coverage**

Without question, Americans increasingly recognize the issue of health care as directly related to their overall economic well being. A 2007 opinion poll conducted by The Opportunity Agenda found that 72% of the public feels strongly that health care should be considered a human right.<sup>1</sup> With 46 million uninsured Americans, 22,000 deaths a year due to lack of health insurance, and over half of personal bankruptcies caused by medical debt, it is clear that health care reform should remain central within an economic recovery package.

Although the number of uninsured Americans declined slightly last year, analysts remind us that the drop is statistically insignificant and that the numbers of uninsured likely will rise next year. Indeed, for the first time since 2000, the number of Americans under age 65 who lack health insurance decreased – from 47 million in 2006 to 45.6 million in 2007. The Kaiser Foundation attributes this reduction to the expansion of public coverage through programs such as Medicaid, SCHIP, and military programs. From 2006 to 2007, the number of people covered by government health care programs increased – from 27 percent to 27.8 percent; the number of people insured through Medicaid increased to 39.6 million, up from 38.3 million.<sup>2</sup> The implementation of state led

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<sup>1</sup> The Opportunity Agenda, *Human Rights in the U.S. Opinion Research with Advocates, Journalists and the General Public* New York/ Washington, DC, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, *Income, Poverty, and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007*, August 2008.

health care reform, like the Massachusetts health care reform plan, also contributed considerably to this decline.<sup>3</sup>

The deteriorating economy, increasing unemployment, and shrinking state budgets suggest strongly that this slight decline is not a trend. According to the Department of Labor, the unemployment rate was up to 6.5% in October 2008, the highest in 14 years. With fewer Americans employed, more are expected to lose health coverage. Although Medicaid and SCHIP provided coverage to more (otherwise uninsured) people in 2007, the economic downturn will further pinch state-funded programs and leave states with fewer resources for Medicaid and SCHIP. Those already enrolled in these programs may lose coverage, and without significant federal relief, newly uninsured applicants are expected to overwhelm the capacity of safety net programs.

### **Health Care Reform: A “Singular” Solution**

With 70% of individuals seen by HCH projects lacking health insurance, the National Health Care for the Homeless Council long has supported a publicly-financed and privately-administered “single payer” system as the best way to promote equal access to care for all Americans. Advocates in Washington continue to explore the introduction in the Senate of legislation similar to H.R. 676 in the House. Legislation being contemplated by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) may provide an opportunity for advocacy.

The United States National Health Insurance Act (H.R. 676 or *Expanded and Improved Medicare for All*) was introduced last year in the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress by Rep. John Conyers (D-MI) and enjoys the support of 93 Congressional co-sponsors. This legislation would eliminate the current for-profit system by implementing a “single payer” financing mechanism. This type of reform would expand the cost-effective and administratively efficient Medicare program through a progressive and modest payroll tax. All medically necessary care would be covered, including prescription drugs, dental care, vision service, and mental health and addiction treatment.

Senator Kennedy has instructed his staff to start drafting a comprehensive health care reform bill to be introduced in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress. A strong proponent of comprehensive reform, Kennedy once described himself as “a single payer advocate.” Despite this past support, he has yet to introduce a health care bill that utilizes a single payer model even as he has favored the dramatic expansion of Medicare. Now is an opportune time for the Senator to introduce a health care reform bill modeled at least in spirit after H.R. 676 – and for advocates to communicate with Senator Kennedy’s office to advance the single payer solution.

#### **ACTION:**

- **Read the Council’s 2008 policy statement on universal health care**  
<http://www.nhchc.org/Advocacy/PolicyPapers/UniversalHealthCareHomelessness2008.pdf>
- **Call, write, or e-mail Senator Kennedy** to ask him to make his health care legislation one that implements a single payer system of reform by modeling it on H.R. 676. To find Senator Kennedy’s contact information go to, <http://kenedy.senate.gov/>

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<sup>3</sup> The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured. *The Decline in the Uninsured in 2007: Why Did It Happen and Can It Last?* October 2008.

- **NOW is the time to start working with your Members of Congress.** To be sure that health care reform is part of the debate in the 111<sup>th</sup> Congress, advocates should continue to educate elected officials before the New Year. Contact your Members of Congress and introduce yourself, explain the work you do, and inform them about single payer health care reform and how it would benefit people experiencing homelessness. Find your Representative at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and your Senators at [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) or call the Capitol Switchboard at 202-224-3121.
- **Contact the Obama Administration Transition Team** to tell them that health care reform must be part of the economic policy fix. E-mail is the best way to communicate with the transition team. Go to <http://www.change.gov/page/s/contact> to draft your message. Be sure to include information about single payer reform.

**For more information or assistance,** contact the National Council's Health Policy Organizer, Adrienne Breidenstine, at [abreidenstine@hchmd.org](mailto:abreidenstine@hchmd.org) or 443-703-1337

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