



*A Passionate Voice for Compassionate Care*

**October 2015**

## **EXPANDING COVERAGE FOR IMMIGRANTS**

### **THE ISSUE**

According to the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey of 2013, over 41 million immigrants are residing in our nation, accounting for 13 percent of the total population. The majority of immigrants work but generally are employed in jobs or industries that offer lower wages and provide limited access to employer sponsored insurance. Due to limited access to employer sponsored coverage and eligibility restrictions for Medicaid and CHIP, non-citizens are three times as likely to be uninsured compared with US-born citizens and are less likely to obtain needed care or preventive services.

CHA believes all persons should have equal access to health care, regardless of immigration status, and therefore supported inclusion of health coverage for both legally resident and non-legally resident immigrants in the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Providing health care access also makes sense from a fiscal standpoint—uninsured immigrants, like uninsured citizens, receive care but in the most expensive setting, the hospital emergency room, adding to hospital uncompensated care costs—including all immigrants in the health care system would save money in the long term by enabling them to receive timely care in a less costly primary care setting. While the ACA does not provide coverage assistance for undocumented immigrants, another provision supported by CHA was included in the ACA, which provides permanent legal residents with equal access to tax credits to help them purchase private health insurance coverage in the Exchange. However, lawfully present immigrants continue to face the five-year waiting period for Medicaid.

Medicaid expansion is a key aspect of the health reform law, and keeping the five-year bar on Medicaid for legally present immigrants prevents them from taking part in a key element of coverage reform, which is more affordable than private health coverage.

### **MINISTRY TRADITION**

The United States Catholic Conference, in their 2003 pastoral letter on immigration *Strangers No Longer*, the bishops reaffirmed that regardless of their legal status, immigrants, like all persons, possess inherent human dignity which should be respected. The social doctrine of the Catholic Church teaches that each person is created in the image of God; that each human life is sacred and possesses inalienable worth; and that health care is essential to promoting and protecting the inherent dignity of every individual. The Catholic health ministry, as stated in our *Vision for U.S. Health Care*, further reaffirms our call to pay special attention to the needs of the poor and the vulnerable, those most likely to lack access to health care, in our journey towards affordable, accessible health care for all. This commitment is why the ministry has strongly supported health coverage for all immigrants, legal residents and undocumented residents.

### **CHA'S POSITION AND ACTIVITIES**

CHA continues to support legislation to expand health coverage for immigrants, including elimination of the current moratorium on access to federal health programs for legal immigrants for

the first five years of residence in the U.S. This provision was enacted into law in 1997 and has been amended to allow legal immigrant children and pregnant women to be exempt from the five-year waiting period under Medicaid and CHIP at state option.

CHA also supports comprehensive immigration reform and strongly urges Congress to continue efforts to pass legislation such as the bill approved by the Senate in 2013. Together with our immigration coalition partners, we will urge Congress in particular to ensure:

- An earned path to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented persons in the United States, and the priority of family reunification within comprehensive reform legislation
- The extension of eligibility to those in the pathway to citizenship for tax subsidies in the Exchange under the ACA
- That years spent under any transitional legal status also apply to any waiting period for federal benefits for legal immigrants, such as the five-year moratorium on access to Medicaid benefits
- That no legislative or statutory changes be enacted to expedite removal proceedings for immigrants currently in the US
- Compassionate care of undocumented families in US custody and adequate funding for health care, housing and legal services for unaccompanied children