

# Advocacy and the Catholic Health Ministry

By MICHAEL RODGERS, MA

In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reminds us that “*none of us can think we are exempt from concerns for the poor and for social justice*.” Clearly, the Pope’s exhortation has been a hallmark of the Catholic Health Association’s advocacy efforts since our beginning over a century ago.

Tracing our historical roots, our efforts have been a significant part of the Catholic health care ministry and its identity. The ministry’s commitment to promoting and defending human dignity, caring for the poor and acting on behalf of justice echo both the pope’s and Jesus’ call.

While much informal advocacy was part of CHA’s early days, it wasn’t until January 1976 that the board of trustees established a formal governmental and legal services office in Washington, D.C. to enhance the Catholic presence on the national level. CHA’s president at the time, Sr. Mary Maurita Sengelaub, RSM, observed that there must be an increased involvement by the association with government at all levels, legislative, executive as well as judicial. If CHA were to have a significant role in the national government and policy arena, she noted, the organization required a more direct and effective system for monitoring and influencing policy and information at its source.

The insights of the association’s early leaders continue today as CHA’s advocacy and public policy programs seek to inform, persuade and motivate action at all levels of government.

CHA always has had a commitment

to support and strengthen the Catholic health ministry — and by extension, the individuals served by our members. Through our sponsors, health systems and facilities, we unite to advance selective strategic directions that are best addressed together, rather than by our individual organizations. Thus, guided by our vision for health care, we strive to transform our communities, public policy and the health delivery system in this country.

Thoughtful consideration goes into identifying and determining the advocacy priorities and focusing on the issues that are most important to Catholic health care and the communities of people entrusted to our care. Grounded in a strategic plan with ongoing input by the broader ministry, CHA’s board of trustees, in conjunction

with the board’s Advocacy and Public Policy Committee, establishes the direction and the framework for the association’s advocacy

agenda, which normally coincides with the election of a new U.S. Congress every two years.

Using the advocacy agenda as a road map, CHA assumes a leadership role with the entire ministry in shaping health care policy on the national level. Working with other faith-based and mission-driven organizations, the association has forged strategic alliances and has participated in as well as led coalitions of other health care advocates supporting legislation and regulations that advance the interest of the Catholic health ministry.

In advocating issues, CHA uses a variety of approaches to support our priorities, such as drafting testimony, authoring issue papers on the impact of public policy on the membership, advocating directly with members

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of Congress and the administration, commenting on regulations, developing coalitions to support or oppose policies, submitting friend of the court (*amicus*) briefs and mobilizing grassroots activities of the ministry.

Over the past four decades, CHA has developed an impressive track record on such issues as advocating for universal health care, promoting vital safety-net programs like the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and Medicaid, strengthening the financing for Medicare, advancing policies on community benefit, improving immigrant health and support programs. More recent efforts have included focus on the environment, addressing the problems of human trafficking and efforts to eliminate disparities based on race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status.

Currently in the United States, new and renewed focus on expanding health coverage, insuring quality outcomes for patients and coordinating care through the entire continuum are all part of the new health care reality. Providers have been challenged to expand their approach to health delivery and venture out of traditional silos into new relationships. CHA members and our advocacy initiatives have been at the forefront of these changes. Clearly, Catholic health providers have been leaders in ushering in a new era of health transformation.

Recognizing these realities, CHA’s advocacy priorities are grounded in the core values that have informed our vision for health care delivery in this country: recognition of the fundamental human dignity of each individual; strong concern for the poor and vulnerable; recognition that health care is a basic human right; conviction that access to health care is an essential element contributing to the broader common good; understanding that our initiatives must consider stewardship and the broader needs of a society; and finally, recognition that operating in a

pluralist society means health delivery must respect the religious and ethical values of patient and provider alike.

Stemming from these core values — human dignity, a concern for the poor, a commitment to justice, the common good, stewardship and pluralism — CHA’s advocacy priorities in our centennial year are divided into five major initiatives.

**1** Continuing the association’s long tradition of working to ensure access to health care and coverage for all. Under this priority, CHA advocates a health care system that achieves health equity by ensuring everyone has access to quality health care services.

**2** Supporting public policies that focus on programs assisting the poor and vulnerable. As the providers of last resort for millions of Americans, the health care safety net faces many challenges, including cuts and reductions in funding. Ensuring a strong safety net will continue to be a significant policy priority for CHA. Continuing to advocate enhancements and expansion of Medicaid and CHIP will be ongoing initiatives.

**3** Supporting measures that allow us to maintain our Catholic identity and insure our continued ability to advocate conscience protections for the ministry. As an organization, CHA is committed to the importance of human dignity and life from the moment of conception through natural death. Advocating health care programs and policies that acknowledge our religious, ethical and moral values always will be a central focus of our advocacy concerns.

**4** Strengthening aging and chronic care services. CHA will continue to support public policies and efforts to coordinate and integrate person-centered health care services along

the entire continuum of care, ensuring compassionate care while protecting the inherent dignity of every individual. Today, America is experiencing one of the largest demographic shifts in our country’s history as more and more persons reach 65 years of age. Census figures estimate that nearly 8,000 persons per day turn 65. Obviously, this demographic shift presents challenges to the society in general and to health care providers in particular. Through our skilled nursing homes, home care services, senior housing programs, palliative care and hospice programs, CHA continues its efforts to address the needs of this growing, vulnerable population.

**5** Focusing on efforts that commit individual health systems and ministries to improving the overall health of their communities.

The Catholic health care ministry has a long history of serving those in need and speaking for those whose voices often go unheard. As CHA embarks on its second century as a ministry of the Catholic Church, we are strengthened by the challenges put forth by Pope Francis when he said: “The measure of the greatness of a society is found in the way it treats those most in need, those who have nothing apart from their poverty!”<sup>1</sup>

Advocacy for just public policies in health care is a fundamental element to CHA’s ministry in helping to fulfill the healing mission of Jesus.

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**NOTE**

1. Francis, address during visit to the community of Varginha (Manguinhos), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, (July 25, 2013).

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