

Serving Members In a Time of Change

BY DANIEL F. RUSSELL

The Catholic healthcare ministry is in the midst of changes more profound than it has ever experienced. The imperative to hold down costs while increasing access to care is already transforming the U.S. payment and delivery system and forcing us to rethink our assumptions about our role in promoting health and well-being. And as the number of women religious involved in Catholic healthcare declines, the ministry's leadership structure is undergoing a similar revolution. Finally, collaborations and mergers with non-Catholic providers are causing many executives—lay or religious—to ask what it means to be a Catholic healthcare provider.

As I begin my term as chairperson of the Catholic Health Association's (CHA's) Board of Trustees, my goal is to ensure that CHA remains a tremendous value for its members. But I say this realizing that CHA is only as strong as its programs and services are effective in serving its members. In this time of change, CHA needs to hear from you—the members—about your changing needs. If we can enhance services that already provide a benefit to members, we want to know. If members need services CHA does not currently provide, we need to know. If you believe the communication mechanism needs improvement or you are not being heard, please let me know.

In the coming year, CHA will begin implementing a plan for competency-based assessment of executives in Catholic healthcare (see p. 35). This initiative is critical because it can help to ensure that Catholic healthcare organizations retain their core values as they progress through the transitions they are experiencing. As CHA members become part of integrated delivery systems that include non-Catholic providers, sponsors may have less direct influence on plans and operations. The ministry will need strong, committed leaders to ensure that sponsors' values and charism continue to shape the culture of Catholic healthcare.

The Catholic healthcare ministry came into being as a response to community needs. Serving



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communities has always been our mission. However, as healthcare reform takes place, and as populations change through factors such as immigration or aging, those needs change.

To remain faithful to our mission, we must make a concerted effort to find out what those needs are—not only for today, but more importantly for the future. Our decisions about how to allocate resources and which partners to collaborate with should be driven by a clear vision of what will enhance our communities' health and well-being. Healthcare reform—even if it includes universal coverage—cannot guarantee that communities receive the health and human services they require. Hard work and value-driven commitment at the local level will be critical to ensuring that healthcare reform creates real community benefit.

The advocacy principles espoused by CHA will not be completely satisfied in a healthcare reform bill passed in 1994. I believe that any legislation passed this year will only be the beginning of a discussion, at both the federal and state levels, that will carry on for many years.

We must therefore continue to advocate for the type of reform we believe the American people deserve. For CHA to remain an effective public policy force, we must build on the relationships we have forged in recent years, establishing even better mechanisms for communicating with our members and continuing to work closely with other organizations that have values and principles similar to ours.

Policymakers have been debating whether American healthcare is in a state of crisis. However we describe the situation, we know that change is absolutely necessary.

Only recently has the nation as a whole begun to take a hard look at the problems within our healthcare system. The growing public consensus on the need for change is what makes the present such an opportunity for us. If we want to be a significant force in the reform movement, we will have to continue to participate. I look forward to working with you in the year ahead. □