

Power to the People: Our Voices Can Make Change Happen



BY JEFF TIEMAN

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It is campaign season, and there are few other times when Americans are as inundated with statistics. Who is up in the polls? Whose policies are more popular? Which messages are resonating and which are falling flat?

When you combine electoral politics with health care, the numbers can get even crazier, and more convoluted. Few industries use statistical data more than health care — and dueling statistics are aplenty. The health insurance lobby, for instance, can use numbers to show why controversial health savings accounts (HSAs) are increasingly common while opponents can use a different set of numbers to show why HSAs are ineffective vehicles for providing coverage to many people.

At CHA, we look closely at numbers to illuminate new perspectives and help make our case for change. We talk about the number of uninsured and vulnerable. We quantify the benefits Catholic hospitals provide to their communities. We analyze legislation to understand its economic and practical effect on individuals and families.

Also, we conduct public opinion research so that we can understand better how people in this country view the issues that are important to CHA — and to the ministry. This data helps us discern the concerns of voters, develop and tailor appropriate messages and learn how we can tap into Americans' sense of fairness and justice as we work to create a health care system that serves everyone.

In our most recent public opinion survey, we added some questions that CHA had never asked before, and which we are fairly certain no one else has asked either. With a national election nearing, and health care continuing to be a primary concern for voters, we wanted to find out how the public thinks health care change will happen. What will be the drivers? Who will be the primary movers? What factors will force our leaders to act?

On that score, we learned some interesting things. Asked which would be the most effective way to get politicians to act on health care reform, a

plurality of voters — 44 percent — said citizens making their voices heard would best get the job done. Twenty-two percent said it would take diverse interest groups building consensus, 19 percent said it would take politicians themselves proposing and implementing solutions and 9 percent said reform will result from business leaders lobbying for it.

What this means to us is fairly simple: people are ready and willing to engage in the health care reform dialogue. And jaded as Washington can seem to us sometimes, we also know that if politicians hear from voters early and often, they eventually have no choice but to act.

The opinion survey was conducted for CHA by Public Opinion Strategies, Alexandria, Va. The survey included responses from 800 likely voters nationwide, reached by telephone March 31 to April 2, 2008. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.46 percent.

Cost is most often cited as the reason health reform is so difficult. In our opinion survey, we decided to inquire about that issue and take into account the recent downturn in the U.S. economy. So we asked likely voters, "If the federal government were successful in making available quality health care to everyone, what effect would it have on the economy?"

Surprisingly, 44 percent of voters said health care reform would strengthen the economy. Twenty-five percent said reform would weaken the economy and 24 percent said it would have little effect. The takeaway here is, again, straightforward: a plurality of Americans clearly believes health care reform and economic security are connected. It is important we make this case, or cynics can paint reform as too expensive or harmful to the economy.

Finally, we repeated a question we asked last year: How much attention are you paying to the presidential candidates' proposals on health care reform? Only 7 percent said they are paying no attention and the vast majority (76 percent) is paying some or a lot. Again, the numbers show us that Americans are



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watching this issue closely and care about the outcome.

This signals an opportunity for CHA, Catholic health organizations and others to continue pressing the message for change since it clearly resonates with most people. It is the only way to help move lawmakers from paralysis to policy.

These opinion survey results are an accurate gauge of how people in this country feel about health care, which affects every one of us — and for which we must find an equitable and compassionate solution. Knowing how people think of the issue, what they still need to learn about it and how we can inspire them to raise their voices for change is more than a statistical exercise. It is one of the steps we can take to move toward the future we all know is possible, the same future we imagine in the ministry's *Vision for U.S. Health Care*.

We can get there if every one of us stands up and insists on change. And that's more than a statistic. That's a fact. ■



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