

# Health Reform Overview: Where Are We Headed?

**L**ike it or not, the 2008 presidential race is under way. Candidates from both sides of the aisle are broad-casting messages about health care reform and developing plans to cover the nation's uninsured. The candidates are doing this not only because our health system needs urgent reform but also because the American people are demanding something different than the status quo, which, as we know, leaves some 47 million people marginalized from the health care system.

## A TWO-TRACK EFFORT

As the momentum continues to grow in states, and even at the federal level, we must continue to operate on the two parallel tracks that are most likely to help move us to a system that works for everyone.

The first of those tracks is advocacy on issues with immediate priority, including reauthorization of the 10-year-old State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which, at any given moment, provides health care for more than 4 million children but will cease to exist in September unless it is reauthorized by Congress and the president. With 9 million children still uninsured, and many of them eligible for SCHIP, this critical program cannot be neglected or shortchanged.

The second track is involving the public in the campaign for longer-range change. SCHIP is but the first step in a process that grows more promising all the time. Part of that process involved the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, which convened listening sessions around the country to hear what people want and expect from the U.S. health care system. The Catholic health ministry contributed thousands of comments and participated in many of the community forums held from coast to coast.

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group's overarching recommendation—based on what it heard in public meetings, online comments, written letters, and health surveys—is that everyone in the country should have affordable health care. President Bush issued a less than lukewarm response to

the recommendations, arguing that they contain too little in the way of consumer-directed, or market-driven health care, i.e., health savings accounts and tax incentives for coverage. While CHA believes that HSAs and tax-code incentives may be part of developing a health care system that serves everyone, we also believe the national conversation should be expanded to acknowledge many of the Working Group's important findings and recommendations, which are sound, insightful, and based on public deliberation—they are, in essence, what the people of this country expressly want.

## AN ACCELERATING PACE

Other recommendations made by the Working Group are also of critical importance, including guaranteeing protection against very high health care costs and fundamentally restructuring the way end-of-life care is financed and delivered. Even if none of these recommendations is adopted, they represent an excellent place to continue the discussion that Americans clearly want to have about improving our health care system.

As states become more active in developing new health policy to broaden coverage and access, the pace is accelerating on Capitol Hill, too. Sen. Max Baucus (D-MT), chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, recently said that health care for everyone should be our next major health policy goal—and it should be achieved. His committee and others are holding hearings about how to get there, and often citing SCHIP as a model for successfully reaching vulnerable populations.

Covering all children would be a terrific accomplishment for America—and for our children and families. It would also, we believe, provide the fuel and momentum we need to get at the bigger goal, namely health coverage for every person in this country. We can get there, and there has never been a better time to rally around the cause.

Those of you in the field can help in many ways, mostly by making your voices heard on this issue. You can also encourage your friends and colleagues to help support SCHIP—and broader health care reform—by contacting members of Congress, writing to newspaper editors, and focusing the message on how no moral nation allows its children to go without health care. ■



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