

January 7, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
235 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-0508

Honorable Harry Reid, Senate Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
522 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-2005

Dear President Obama, Speaker Pelosi and Majority Leader Reid,

We applaud the House, Senate and the President for all of your hard work to bring us so close to meaningful health care reform. It has been a monumental undertaking in the face of an unproductive and many times disingenuous opposition. However, we are deeply concerned about several aspects of the current Senate bill and therefore, the final outcome of health reform policy, including the taxing of health benefits, a lack of shared responsibility to ensure employers are contributing to their workers' health insurance, and the absence of a public option to keep insurance companies honest and keep insurance costs down. We are a coalition of organizations that represent communities of color and low-income communities and our recommendations below give voice to the specific concerns of those communities.

We strongly urge House and Senate negotiators to address the problematic provisions listed below in order to achieve the goals of health reform: affordable, quality health care for American families.

Affordability. Requiring people to buy health insurance that they cannot afford is not a legitimate, feasible, sustainable, or desirable solution to our health care crisis. We believe the House bill got the affordability balance right and suggest that the final bill expand Medicaid to at least 150% of poverty. Consider the reality that the average family of three earning \$28,400 (or 155% of poverty) would pay \$2100 more in premiums and out-of-pocket costs under the Senate bill than the House bill. The Senate bill would have a serious impact on the quality of life for working people in this country. Without better affordability provisions, people will continue to have to choose between groceries and health care, and thousands of families without health insurance will continue to go bankrupt because of unaffordable health care costs.

Equal Access to Health Care. Again, the House bill got it right by ensuring immigrants have equitable access to the health care exchanges when purchasing insurance with their own money. The Senate bill explicitly excludes undocumented immigrants from buying into the health care exchanges with their own money. This provision adds unnecessary cost and administrative burden to the system, saves no money, and discriminates against a population of people in need of health care. This prohibition is irresponsible and would effectively bar many people from providing health insurance to their loved ones. It also harms the public health by discouraging people from getting emergency vaccines and health care when they are sick.

Health Disparities. The House bill includes important provisions to narrow health disparities, which disproportionately impact communities of color, and they should be retained in the final package. These include language access, workforce development provisions and empowerment zones to focus efforts on job creation, improved access to health services for communities in need, better data collection and transparency to capture critical information about communities of color, and improving culturally competent care to best meet the needs of underserved communities.

Finally, the House bill includes the reauthorization of the Indian Health Care Improvement Act, which provides critical improvement to health care in Indian Country and should be included in the final health reform package. It's imperative that we do all we can to end the very real and unjust differences in health outcomes in America. It's simply unacceptable that Hispanics are twice as likely to die from diabetes, that tuberculosis strikes Asian Americans at 16 times the rate of whites, and that cancer kills 35 percent more African-Americans than whites.

The undersigned organizations proudly and strongly support your efforts to reform a health care system characterized by out of control costs and vast disparities in access, coverage and outcomes. We implore every decision maker involved to make this bill worthy of the moniker historical reform by addressing these fundamental issues and ensuring the goals of affordable health care for American families are met.

Sincerely,

Wade Henderson
President and CEO
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights

Deepak Bhargava
Executive Director
Campaign for Community Change

Gregory Cendana
President
United States Student Association

Janet Murguia
President and CEO
National Council of La Raza

Benjamin Jealous
President and CEO
NAACP

Steve Phillips
Chairman
Powerpac.org