



Health Reform Imperatives for Women and Communities of Color

"And if we want to achieve true equality for women, if that is our goal; if we want to ensure that women have opportunities that they deserve, if that is our goal; if we want women to be able to care for their families and pursue things that they could never imagine, then we have to reform the system. We have to reform the system. The status quo is unacceptable. It is holding women and families back, and we know it."

– First Lady Michelle Obama, September 18, 2009

Congress must act now to reform our nation's health care system, which is drastically underserving women and communities of color. By 2042, people of color are expected to comprise the majority of the U.S. population. Today, people of color make up more than 30% of the U.S. workforce, even though they are only about 26% of the U.S. population. Women of color, in particular, make up a critical force in our economy. Companies owned by women of color were the fast-growing group among all companies from 2002 to 2008. The future of our nation hinges on the health and well-being of women of color.

Yet today's broken health care system denies millions of women of color the ability to live healthy lives and renders them unable to participate fully in social, civic, and political affairs in their communities and – more importantly – in the lives of their families. More than one-third of the 45 million Americans who lack health insurance are women of color. They live in underserved and under-resourced communities, lack appropriate access to primary health care, and endure more chronic illnesses and disease that go undiagnosed or undertreated, resulting in shortened lives and avoidable deaths.

Nearly four out of every 10 Latinas (38%) and nearly one in four Black (23%) and Asian and Pacific Islander women (24%) lack health insurance coverage. Many women of color who have coverage are under-insured, or face cultural and/or linguistic barriers to accessing quality care.

Access to quality, affordable health care for all people who live in the United States is absolutely essential. We cannot allow politics or partisanship to block the effort to reform health care. As women of color, we support passage of a health care reform bill that ensures access to high-quality, affordable, and easily accessible comprehensive health care for all that:

- 1. Ensures that everyone in the U.S. receives equal access to health coverage.** Increasing access to affordable health care is essential to ensuring that all women receive the preventative and medical care they need to lead healthy and productive lives. A fair and equal reform bill would provide everyone – including immigrants – with the opportunity to pay into and benefit from the health care system.
- 2. Ensures that health coverage is available over the course of one's lifespan.** Women frequently encounter disruptions in care because of divorce, the death of a partner, or job transitions. Such life changes should not impact a person's ability to access the health care system.

3. **Guarantees voluntary access to preventative care.** Accessing preventative care both controls costs and allows women to live healthier, more productive lives. Patients should be made aware of preventative care options that have been shown to strengthen health outcomes, like smoking cessation programs, fitness programs, and routine diagnostic tests.
4. **Expands public programs such as Medicaid and CHIP.** Medicaid and CHIP comprise a vital safety net, providing health care to the nation's poorest and most vulnerable. Medicaid and CHIP were specifically designed for low-income populations and include benefits – like preventative care and non-emergency transportation – that are often not covered by private insurers.
5. **Establishes a public option to provide competition, ensure lower costs, and accountability for insurance companies.** Low- and moderate-income individuals and small businesses need access to the quality, cost-contained care that the public health insurance option would offer. Health reform should include a public plan or similar mechanism that will ensure greater competition in a market where costs have been sky-rocketing at twice the rate of wages.
6. **Guarantees affordability by eliminating discrimination based on health status and gender.** No individual should be disqualified from accessing coverage based on a pre-existing condition.
7. **Invests in community-based health services that promote health equity.** Women of color need comprehensive health care services that span a woman's lifetime and address her physical, mental, dental, reproductive, and sexual health care needs in a culturally appropriate way. Investments in safety net institutions and programs, community health centers, and community revitalization efforts are all integral parts of transforming underserved communities into healthy places for families to live and work.
8. **Ensures vulnerable and underserved communities have access to equitable and linguistically and culturally appropriate care, with particular attention to the reproductive health needs of women and girls.** Language barriers can reduce access to health care, jeopardize the quality of care, and increase the risk of medical errors.
9. **Adopts quality improvement programs that address the health care challenges and needs of underserved communities.** Because underserved communities and populations are typically sicker and face greater barriers to treatment compliance, performance measurements can inadvertently dampen provider enthusiasm for treating low-income and minority communities and populations. Quality improvement efforts should take into account the challenges and needs of underserved communities and populations and reward efforts that reduce disparities and improve patient outcomes.
10. **Develops standardized measures for collecting, monitoring, and reporting data on health disparities.** In order to better meet the needs of women of color, any reform package should include a strategy for developing appropriate standardized measures, indicators, and methods for collecting and reporting data to learn more about health care access, quality and outcomes by patient demographic factors, including race and ethnicity, age, gender, primary language, socio-economic position, geographic location, and health literacy.

For more information or for ways to get involved,
please contact Emily Napalo at enapalo@rabengroup.com or (202) 587-2869.