

ROLL CALL

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People Over Politics: Pass Health Care Reform Now

Nov. 30, 2009, 2:03 p.m.

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Special to Roll Call

Listening to the cable news chatter about the Senate vote to consider health care reform and the recently passed House bill, sometimes the discussion about health care seems too abstract. Political analysts talk about cloture votes and policymakers discuss public options, pre-existing conditions, doughnut holes and reimbursement rates, but most of us simply want to be able to go to the doctor and get the care we want or need without going broke. Whenever one of us gets too wrapped up in the details of these policies, we remember women such as Esmin Elizabeth Green, a 49-year-old home health care worker who went to the emergency room last year. After being ignored for 24 hours, Esmin died lying on the floor of that emergency room at which point, people stepped over her dead body.



Everyone in the country is interested in health care reform, but women of color, like Esmin Elizabeth Green, are in dire need of that reform. As the heads of national organizations dedicated to women of color, we know that better than anyone. Some Asian women have reported skipping mammograms because of cultural and language barriers. Black women struggle with higher rates of heart disease and diabetes. Mothers of all backgrounds have chosen between feeding their children and going to the doctor.

Our constituents are a growing demographic and have a profound impact on our communities at every level. By 2042, “minorities,” or people of color, will be the majority of the U.S. population, and women of color will take on an even greater share of the decision-making in our nation. We play a central role in our families, often caring for parents and children; in our communities, as leaders and advocates; and in professional circles as lawyers, college presidents and corporate CEOs.

Despite the growing importance of women of color in our society, we are disproportionately uninsured or underinsured. While 61 percent of all Americans report having employer-sponsored health insurance, that number is substantially lower for women of color. Only 41 percent of Latinos and 52 percent of African-Americans report having employer-sponsored health care. Almost 4 in 10 Latinas and 1 in 4 African-American and Asian women are uninsured. In addition, women of color are also more likely to have a chronic or pre-existing condition and spend a greater portion of their income on health care than others.

It is in response to these realities that we have come together to elevate the voices of women of color. Each of our organizations — the Black Women’s Health Imperative, the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum and the National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health — has been working individually to engage our members on health care reform. Together, as Women of Color United for Health Reform, we are activating a broader base that reaches across racial divisions. And women of color across the U.S. are responding. In mid-October, Women of Color United for Health Reform hosted a call connecting White House officials with more than 400 women of color from 31 states, the District of Columbia and the Virgin Islands. One week later, more than 1,000 women of color from almost every state participated in our National Call-In Day for Health Reform.

As Senators debate this issue, they must remember that for America to work, we need health care that works for women of color. We need to reform the health care system to ensure that everyone in the U.S. receives equal

access to health care coverage throughout their lives. We need health care that is affordable and accessible wherever we live and whatever languages we speak. All women and girls, despite the political tumult we saw in the House, need access to the full array of reproductive health services available with modern medicine.

There are many more things that women like Esmin Elizabeth Green and her sisters of color across the United States need, but these basic reforms will make a great impact in improving their lives. Senators are talking a lot about the politics of health care reform, but those of us on the front lines only see the people who are in need of real reform. There is no time to delay. Pass health care reform now.

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