



ISSUE

ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE IN WISCONSIN

BACKGROUND – HEALTH CARE AS A MORAL ISSUE

In his encyclical letter, *Pacem in terris* (Peace on Earth) Pope John XXIII identified medical care and security in case of sickness as basic human rights. Here in the United States, access to health care for all people in the United States has been a policy goal of the US Catholic Bishops since 1919. In a 1993 resolution on health care reform, the US Bishops articulated a fundamental principle:

“Health care is more than a commodity; it is a basic human right, an essential safeguard of human life and dignity. We believe our people’s health care should not depend on where they work, how much their parents earn or where they live.”

The fact that so many in our midst lack access to affordable health care remains one of the greatest injustices suffered in our society today.

This legislative session a number of organizations from nearly every major sector including labor, business, health care providers, insurers, consumers and faith organizations are seriously engaging various legislative proposals to move Wisconsin toward a health care system in which health care resources are not only distributed more equitably, but also more responsibly.

The identification of health care as a priority issue for such a wide range of interest groups creates a new moment for public policy makers to seriously engage this fundamental justice issue.

PROPOSALS FOR REFORM

Compared to other states, Wisconsin residents are more likely to have health insurance coverage. Advocates for reform see Wisconsin’s relatively good record as an asset that enables our state to take a leadership role in reform. The legislature has approached the issue of health care cost containment in a number of ways, primarily passing incremental reforms to relieve the pressure that soaring health care costs are placing on the rest of the economy.

However two comprehensive proposals are drawing some attention:

Wisconsin Health Security Act. Senate Bill 388 (also Assembly Bill 806) proposes the appointment of a task force to develop a plan to move Wisconsin to a centralized, state-run health insurance pool by 2008. The Wisconsin Health Security Act creates a new department, which would work with regional advisory bodies to design a plan so that all Wisconsin residents may access “reasonable medical services necessary to maintain health, enable diagnosis, and provide treatment or rehabilitation for an injury, disability, or disease.” The Health Security Act is supported by the Coalition for Wisconsin Health, a coalition representing a range of labor, physician, health advocacy, faith and farming interests seeking a universal system of coverage that would eliminate private insurance by centralizing administration into a single state-run pool.

The Wisconsin Health Plan proposes a blend of government involvement and market forces to extend coverage to the vast majority of state residents.

Under the Wisconsin Health Plan, an independent board (like the Worker’s Compensation Board) would be responsible for levying an assessment on all Wisconsin employers based upon the employer’s annual wages. It is projected that the assessment would derive sufficient funds to provide each individual in the state who is under 65 and is not covered by another federally funded program (i.e. Medicaid) with a voucher to go and purchase a health insurance plan. It is projected that the assessment will also generate sufficient revenue to fund the state’s portion of Medicaid costs, which would take the burden off the state income tax (and other state and local taxes) thus “solving” the continual Medicaid funding problem.

THE CATHOLIC CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEBATE: PRINCIPLES FOR REFORM

The Church offers a number of contributions to the discussion of health care reform. Church teaching brings a moral dimension to the discussion. As a health care provider, the Church offers practical insight into the health care delivery system. As an employer, the Church itself contends with the escalating costs of providing quality coverage for all those who serve the Church in a variety of ministries. The US Bishops emphasize that Catholic health care reform advocacy should focus on four key principles:

Priority concern for the poor/universal access. Those whom the current system excludes should receive first consideration for allocation of health care resources. This includes not just “coverage” but real access to quality care regardless of whether one lives in an urban or rural community.

Respect for human life and human dignity. The Church’s commitment to the fundamental right to health care is rooted in our commitment to the value of all human life. Therefore a reformed system should not only insure access, but it should respect the dignity of all life from conception to natural death. A consistent concern for human dignity is strongly demonstrated by providing access to quality care from the prenatal period throughout infancy and childhood, into adult life and at the end of life.

Pursuing the common good and preserving pluralism. A reformed health care system need not be monolithic in its application. Indeed it is possible and preferable to formulate a health care system that, just as in the social services realm, builds on the resources of both the private and public sectors working in partnership. The health care system must continue to respect the religious and ethical values of both individuals and institutions involved in the health care system.

Restraining costs. One of the critical failings of the American health care system is the significant imbalance between the financial investment in health care and the ability to provide a just distribution of health care services. The escalation of health care costs impacts all sectors of the economy and is perhaps the biggest factor impacting the state’s ongoing budget shortfalls.

ACTION REQUESTED

The WCC has not taken a position in support of any specific plan. Rather, Catholics are encouraged to evaluate each proposal in light of the criteria articulated by the US Bishops. WCC is urging legislators to take advantage of this moment and place Wisconsin at the forefront of health care reform by supporting policies consistent with these criteria by:

- Providing access to quality health care services for *all* Wisconsin citizens focusing on the needs of the poor and vulnerable as a primary condition for a just health care system.
- Enabling health care providers to promote preventative health care to improve health outcomes and reduce the overall expense of the health care delivery system.
- Fully respecting the dignity of every human life from conception to natural death and honoring the right of health care practitioners to offer health care services that are consistent with their religious and moral beliefs.
- Shifting the focus from health care as a commodity, to health care as a social good.

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