

OPINION

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Comprehensive Means Everyone

Keeping mental health in the equation

BY M. LINDA JARAMILLO



There was a time when the public health care system could support the needs of those who were suffering from mental illness. At least that was true in some states in this country. But that was long ago.

It is now rare to find a mental health care system in any state that is available to those who have no health insurance. When did mental health get dropped from the concept of health and wellness?

Our mental health care system has been broken or completely non-existent for years. We've talked and talked about it. We complain about the clo-

organizations and faith communities have stepped in to provide needed emergency services like a meal or a bed or just someone to talk to. These services are absolutely essential, but we cannot expect them to be the solution to a much bigger social issue.

We are a wealthy nation and a sophisticated society, yet we continue to just talk and do little about this tragic situation. We now have a chance that we cannot let pass us by. We have a chance to influence our Congress and President while they are in the debate about a comprehensive health care system.

Any health care proposal must include coverage for all persons; access regardless of ability to pay.

sure of state hospitals where housing and care for the chronically mentally ill was taking place.

We are concerned about persons being released onto the streets of our communities. But, we do not seem willing to provide the financial support to rebuild this system. Instead, we pay for jails and prisons which have become the housing center for those who are mentally ill or suffering from addictions.

Jails and prisons are not intended or equipped to be health care institutions. Yes, some of the crimes committed do require incarceration. But, honestly many of the crimes are petty and part of a cycle of repeated offenses that result in long-term sentences. Some folks have told me that they simply have no place else to go.

People who are unable to hold a job due to ongoing emotional and mental health issues cannot afford housing, food, clothing, or health care. So, they find themselves living on the streets and if they're lucky, they find a place in a local homeless shelter for a few nights.

Thankfully, human services

Comprehensive means complete and all-inclusive and that includes mental health care.

An excerpt from a pastoral letter on health care reform from leaders of the United Church of Christ reads "All parts of creation deserve to be healed when broken, injured, or sick. All persons deserve to be tenderly touched by concerned healers. Health care is not only a basic human right but a human need. As people of faith, we believe that it is a moral imperative to transform healthcare so that it is inclusive, accessible, affordable, and accountable."

Please contact your lawmakers today and tell them that any health care proposal must include coverage for all persons; access regardless of ability to pay; a full set of benefits; a choice of physicians and other providers; elimination of racial and ethnic and other health care disparities; waiver of pre-existing condition exclusions without any age limits; and a public option.

M. Linda Jaramillo is executive minister for Justice Ministries in the United Church of Christ.



Meaningful Reform Expands Access

Affordability comes with public option

BY U.S. REP. MAXINE WATERS

The American people are strongly in favor of a public option as an alternative competitor to private insurance companies. How can we expect these insurance companies to expand access and make health care insurance more affordable without increased competition?

The pressure on Congress

from lobbyists who represent health care reform opponents is immense: recent reports suggest there may be as many as six lobbyists for each Member of Congress working to defeat meaningful health care reform.

I cannot and will not sit by and quietly allow outside opposition to dismantle a program meant to provide the American people with an option so that they and their families can access quality, affordable health care.

I recently attended several

events in my district where nonprofit community clinics offered free health screenings and other necessary medical treatments to thousands of people who simply cannot afford them.

After seeing firsthand the overwhelming demand for these services - compounded by the 14,000 Americans losing their health insurance each day and by persistently high national unemployment and foreclosure rates - I have never been more convinced of the immediate need to reform our health insurance system.

I strongly urge my colleagues involved in health care reform negotiations to join me in standing up in support of the public option and not caving in to insurance company opposition - we've played their game before and the losers are millions of working Americans and their families who either spend a disproportionate amount of their income on health insurance or who simply cannot afford health insurance in the first place.

Maxine Waters is a Representative of Congress from Los Angeles.

Why the Public Option Gets Dumped

A casualty of playing the game

BY EARL OFARI HUTCHINSON

Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius found out the hard way that when you say what your boss may really be thinking or worse yet doing it on a crucial piece of legislation you get quickly smacked down.

Sibelius in an unscripted and unvetted moment said that President Obama's public option in the health care reform war could go by the wayside if that's what it takes to get Senate obstructionists to back a reform bill.

Sebelius didn't say anything that Obama point man, Rahm Emanuel didn't hint at weeks earlier, and that Obama himself has hinted at. The public option is not only expendable but likely will go.

Even if Sibelius, Emanuel, and Obama hadn't dropped

the hint that it can be tossed, it would still likely go. This has much less to do with angry town hall loudmouths, the drum beat Fox Network, Limbaugh, and the legion of right shrill blogger attacks, and GOP orchestrated Senate attacks on the public option, than Obama the politician.

must be said again and again that Obama quickly morphed into the archtypical Hollywood casting lot moderate, centrist Democrat who will cut a political deal with legislation to get something, anything, out of it that can be sold as a win. This is nothing new, let alone a sign of duplicity, with Obama.

A cursory read of his record, as well as a fine comb of his speeches, statements, and interviews, that the talk during the campaign of Obama as an unreconstructed far out liberal was mostly talk by first Hillary Clinton, and later by conservative talk jocks, Sarah Palin and the GOP attack teams.

If he even remotely resembled what the attack hounds claimed he was he could never have gotten the stamp of approval from top Democrats, beat down the Clinton machine, gotten the parade of endorsements from former Reagan and Bush Sr., and even W. Bush officials. And most important, broken the cash registers on fund raising.

Obama's centrist bent was plainly evident during the campaign when he and McCain at times sounded like they were more agreement than not on the issues of expansion of stem-cell research, immigration, faith-based social services, expanded government wiretapping, building more nuclear power plants, global warming, fair trade, and the death penalty. The similarity between the two was more glaring when Obama edged closer to McCain

on their plans on health care and taxes and the Iraq War.

The truism in American presidential politics is that liberals and even one time progressives always run to the political left in the early stages of a campaign. They then move quickly to the center or even rightward as victory becomes a real possibility.

Even when Obama spoke most passionately about change he kept the door wide open to reshape, massage, and contour policy issues to conform to what was pragmatic, doable and acceptable. Obama's voting record in the Illinois state legislature gave a strong hint that his liberal record was hazier than it appeared.

He got high marks from liberal groups on votes on environmental, gun control, abortion, and civil liberties protections, and ethics reform. But he also deftly ducked taking positions on some of the same issues when they could stir rancor and were potentially polarizing. During his stint in the legislature, Obama used the tactic more often than most senators and rarely gave a reason why.

Whatever Obama's motive for not taking a firm stand on these issues, and not spelling out the reason why, it helped burnish his credentials with conservative Republicans and right leaning Democrats as a man willing to compromise even conciliate on big ticket issues that conservatives routinely support or oppose.

That hasn't changed. And all signs past and present point to the public option as the latest casualty in the routine compromises that politicians make in playing the political game. And Obama has played the game far better than most.

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