

# Health care occupies Congress, churches and candidates

WASHINGTON – As a Sept. 30 deadline looms for Congress to extend the State Children's Health Insurance Program and presidential candidates roll out the details of their plans for health care reform, new evidence is emerging that churches play an important role in filling the gaps in the current system.

More than 6,000 churches – mostly mainline Protestant congregations, but with some Catholic participants – responded to a recent survey by the National Council of Churches on what kinds of health ministries they offer. Of the respondents, 70 percent said they provide direct health services (defined as medical care by trained health professionals), 65 percent said they offer health education programs and more than half give direct financial assistance to help people pay their medical bills. The results might be skewed by the fact that the responding churches were likely to be those most interested in the topic of health care and because congregations receiving the survey might have passed it along to other congregations more involved in health care ministries. The 6,037 respondents reported nearly 79,000 health-related programs in their congregations or communities – an average of more than 13 for each church.

But the Rev. Eileen W. Lindner, deputy general secretary of the NCC for research and planning, said the survey results released Sept. 18 indicate that U.S. churches “have shown an incredible ability to leverage health care services in extremely creative, innovative and cost-effective ways.”

“They know their communities and they respond to their specific needs,” she added. That response might be more needed than ever these days, in light of President George W. Bush's threatened veto of legislation extending SCHIP and a new report from the health advocacy group Families USA that says nearly 90 million Americans under 65 were without health insurance for some part of 2006 or 2007.

That figure is almost twice the 47 million that the U.S. Census Bureau said were uninsured for the full year in 2006. Four-fifths of those were in families where at least one member worked full or part time.

“This report shows just how many working families are struggling with the skyrocketing costs of health care,” said Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., at a

Washington news conference Sept. 20. "It is simply unacceptable that in the greatest country in the world, a third of Americans have had to go without health insurance at some point over the last two years. Health care should be a right, not a privilege in our country."

More than 10 percent of uninsured Americans are children, and officials at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholic Health Association and Catholic Charities USA are working with Congress to come up with compromise SCHIP legislation that will satisfy both House and Senate, and the Bush administration.

After a conference committee agreement is reached, "we'll attempt to move it through Congress," said Thomas Shellabarger of the USCCB Department of Domestic Social Development. "There are a lot of ifs right now."

At a Sept. 20 news conference, Bush said Democrats were "putting health care coverage for poor children at risk" by calling for a \$35 billion SCHIP expansion. "Health coverage for these children should not be held hostage while political ads are being made and new polls are being taken," he added.

Shellabarger noted that the SCHIP funding proposed by the Bush administration would not even cover all the children currently in the program.

Meanwhile, the top presidential candidates continued to release details of their plans for health care reform if they are elected in 2008. Polling by the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation has found that regardless of their political affiliation voters most want to hear candidates talk about the war in Iraq and health care.

Sen. Hilary Clinton, D-N.Y., spoke Sept. 17 in Des Moines, Iowa, about her proposal to provide tax credits designed to ensure that no American pay more than a certain percentage of his or her income on health care costs.

"We are spending more money and covering fewer people, and too many of our families are paying the price," Clinton said. "We know we have to act."

Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., and former Sen. John Edwards of North Carolina - the other leading Democratic presidential candidates - also recently outlined their health reform plans, while the Republican candidates have been less specific about their policy proposals on health care.

But all of the candidates will have an opportunity to detail their plans in depth this fall at candidate forums organized by Families USA and the Federation of American Hospitals. Kicking off Sept. 24 with Edwards, the forums will each involve only one candidate, who will be questioned for an hour by the same four journalists.

Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA, said the forums would not deal with such potentially divisive issues as abortion and stem-cell research, which he said “get dealt with in many other forums,” but will instead focus on “coverage, costs and access to health care, the top concerns of the American public.”