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Opinions:

Immigrants wouldn't be burden on health plan

By SHAHID HAQUE-HAUSRATH - IR Your Turn - 07/02/09

The vast majority of Montanans believe that access to affordable health care is a fundamental human right, and have voiced their overwhelming support for health care reform that will ensure that no one is forced to forgo necessary medical treatment for themselves or their loved ones.

Truly universal coverage must include access for everyone, without regard to income level, pre-existing conditions or citizenship. Therefore, no matter what health care program emerges from the discussions that are taking place in Congress, participation must not be based on immigration status.

Yeh Ling-Ling, a California resident, argued in an editorial on June 22 that health care reform requires us to turn our backs on our non-citizen neighbors. However, the arguments that she makes are based more on social status and income level than citizenship, and could be equally applied to low-income U.S. citizens. Ling-Ling argues that immigrants may be a drain on the system "because of their low incomes." Disregarding the offensive nature of this generalization, the statement implies that the wealthy are entitled to better health care than lower-income families. The rejection of this notion is at the heart of the debate on health care reform. The health care system that reform produces needs to treat health care as a public good, and ensure that it is available to everyone, without exceptions.

Ling-Ling's arguments appear to be geared not towards immigrants in general, but poor immigrants. However, most Montanans believe in a public health care plan that is taxed on a sliding scale so that everyone can participate. Non-citizens will pay into these programs just like citizens, and should be given the opportunity to obtain health insurance without restrictions and waiting periods based on immigration status.

Excluding immigrants from health care coverage does not reduce costs, because it only increases the use of expensive emergency room services. People who are uninsured receive less preventive care, are more likely to delay seeking treatment for potentially serious conditions, and are diagnosed at more advanced stages of disease. Therefore, when uninsured immigrants come into the hospital, they usually require critical emergency care that is more expensive and less effective than comprehensive health care coverage. Because emergency care must be provided to everyone regardless of immigration status or ability to pay, we are paying to treat illness in the least efficient way possible.

Restricting immigrants' access to health care would also hurt Montana families because legal permanent residents are usually spouses, children, and parents of U.S. citizens. The law requires these "green card" holders to wait several years to obtain citizenship, and delays in processing citizenship applications create even further impediments to citizenship. Many Montana families are "mixed status" families, and if any member of the family is uninsured, medical costs can cripple the entire household.

Immigration enforcement measures have no place in health care, which is based on the dignity and preservation of human life. The pursuit of cost-savings cannot come at the price of human pain and suffering. Enacting health care reform does not require us to close the door on our immigrant neighbors.

Shahid Haque-Hausrath is the managing attorney of the Border Crossing Law Firm in Helena and provides free legal representation to immigrants who cannot afford to pay.

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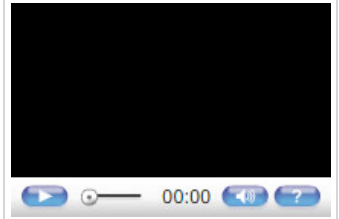


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danr wrote on Jul 2, 2009 6:28 AM:

" But, based on the fact that American tax payer are flipping the bill Shahid, it is a burden for anyone who has never paid taxes, to receive care paid for from said taxes, therefore, they are in fact....a burden.
I find it Ironic, that you defend illegal immigrants for free, and of course, would like them to get free health care. Who would have thought that? LOL "

JSF wrote on Jul 2, 2009 4:05 AM:

" The idea that illegal immigrants will not be a bigger burden on the health care system is not rational. When the federal government is considering bankrupting this country to give us a health care system that has failed in the rest of the world it is total fantasy to think that illegals should be given special status and medical priority. "

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