

**Testimony: Universal Health Care Access Regional Hearings**

Good afternoon State Health Commissioner Daines, Superintendent Dinallo and distinguished members of the Panel. On behalf of the American Heart Association, I would like to thank you for discussing the issue of Universal Health Care, holding these Public Hearings and allowing us to present a brief statement on the issue. I would also like to thank you for making New York a leader in the nation in providing comprehensive, affordable and accessible coverage for nearly every uninsured child in the state. My name is Bill Thompsen and I am the Vice President of Advocacy for the American Heart Association. The American Heart Association is the largest voluntary organization in the world working to reduce disability and death from cardiovascular disease and stroke – the number one and number three killers of New Yorkers. We fund research, develop benchmark treatment guidelines, implement education and awareness initiatives and advocate for policies which reduce cardiovascular disease. An important part of our advocacy mission is to increase access to quality health care for the prevention, detection and treatment of cardiovascular disease and stroke.

As you have heard, we are also working with the American Cancer Society and United Way to impact health disparities in New York City. This collaborative effort is creating linkages among health organizations and providers to promote risk awareness; provide outreach for preventive screening, counseling, and care; and advance access to quality health care.

Preventing cardiovascular disease requires routine medical care that many Americans simply cannot afford. Quality and affordable health care shouldn't be just a dream for young and old. As the childhood obesity epidemic worsens and the baby boom generation ages, heart disease and stroke deaths will skyrocket if we don't make universal health care a priority.

Although much has been done, lack of health insurance is a persistent problem in New York State. One in four New York City residents under the age of 65 is uninsured. In 2003, 15.1% of all New Yorkers were uninsured, with 9.4% of children under the age of 18 without health insurance coverage. Non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to be uninsured and less likely to have employer-sponsored coverage. Non-citizens in New York City are twice as likely as citizens to be uninsured. An estimated 1.3 million New Yorkers were uninsured but eligible for existing public programs in 2002. Between 2000 and 2002, employer sponsored insurance coverage rates declined. The majority of New York's three million uninsured residents work, many of them full time, but still cannot afford coverage for themselves or their families. As a result, New York has experienced exceptionally sharp growth in the number of uninsured individuals who earn too much to qualify for Medicaid, yet too little to afford private health insurance. While the Child Health Plus (CHP) program has extended affordable health insurance to more than 500,000 uninsured children, until recently no comparable program existed for adults—virtually guaranteeing continued growth in the number of uninsured adults in New York.

To ensure that all U.S. residents have access to and coverage for quality health care, regardless of population differences, the American Heart Association supports several principles

1. Health care should be provided for all – Every New Yorker should have access to preventive care, appropriate emergency care as well as diagnostic and treatment procedures. There should also be affordable access to cardiovascular and stroke medications and medical devices, risk modification programs and heart and stroke rehabilitative services.
2. Health care that's affordable – Getting proper health care should not bankrupt individuals, families, businesses or society. There should be reasonable caps on what individuals are required to pay. New York as well as our Federal Government should help supplement the costs for those who need help in

- affording proper health care and provide real options for small businesses who are trying to provide these benefits to their staff..
3. Health care without the “red tape” – Over one million uninsured New Yorkers are eligible for Medicaid and CHP but are not enrolled in these programs, often because individuals do not know they are eligible or find the application process too difficult and confusing. We encourage a health care system that provides clear, up-front explanations of costs and benefits, provides the best value for their dollar, and eliminates unnecessary paperwork;
  4. Health care when and where people need it – All New Yorkers, regardless of their health, deserve adequate coverage that gives them the best available treatment and care in appropriate settings through all life stages and levels of disability.
  5. Access to Improved Quality of Care: The American Heart Association supports increased research into methods to measure quality, outcomes and cost-effectiveness and should participate in the development of cardiovascular and stroke guidelines for appropriate patient care.

Achieving the American Heart Association’s goal of reducing death and disability from cardiovascular disease and stroke by 25 percent by 2010 will be difficult unless all individuals have access to care.

Our desired outcome is that all New York residents have access to and coverage for appropriate and affordable health care. This includes a health care system utilizing treatment protocols and outcomes data which also helps to eliminate healthcare disparities.

Thank you again for your time and we look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Thank You.