

July 4, 2008

To the Coordinators of the Partnership for Coverage in NYS:

Good day to you. My name is Christopher Squillacioti and I am writing to you in response to the public inquiry on health insurance expansion proposals for the great state of New York. Allow me to provide some background on myself. I currently work for the New York State Department of Health in the Office of Long-Term Care as a Project Coordinator studying the adequacy and accountability of the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) rate paid to residents of adult care facilities. I am also currently pursuing my Masters of Science at the University at Albany in Healthcare Policy and Management. I have long been interested and have dedicated the last couple years of my career towards researching and brainstorming on methods that would provide universal, affordable, equitable, and high quality healthcare for all New Yorkers.

The first thing that should be acknowledged is that the state of New York has one of the most sophisticated healthcare systems in the country. This has allowed the majority of individuals and families to access healthcare at a reasonable cost. Initiatives such as Child Health Plus, Family Health Plus, and Healthy New York have made great strides with increasing coverage. However, this is not to say that there are no gaps or affordability concerns. With the recent skyrocketing of fuel prices that have impacted transportation costs, home heating, and grocery bills, the ability to pay for healthcare premiums and deductibles becomes significantly compromised. We are truly at a crossroads, both within the state and within the country, as to which direction we need to take healthcare. The ultimate question we need to ask ourselves is that of our values. What do we value the most as New Yorkers? Until this imperative question is answered with conviction, I do not believe any method of healthcare reform can work on a long-term basis.

Healthcare needs to be valued as a fundamental right for all Americans. Yet, too many Americans do not have the ability to exercise this right. It is crucial for the health and well being of individuals as well as the future of this state and country that healthcare remain accessible, affordable and of high quality. New York has a reputation of

providing one of the better educational, assistance, and safety net arrangements in the country. Of course, with rising healthcare and energy costs there is the question of how we can improve our healthcare delivery structure as well as how long we can sustain our current assistance programs. We must also be practical with alternative approaches to universal coverage so as to not shock the system and thus, frighten people into believing that achieving universal coverage is a bad idea. As with any promising and successful legislative approach, we need to take appropriate measures to increase awareness, educate the public, and formulate a sound, bipartisan infrastructure.

As mentioned earlier, the future of the state relies on a solid and affordable healthcare insurance program. We have an obligation now, and not later, to set forth the groundwork for such a program. A main focus of healthcare reform needs to provide universal coverage for the children of New York State. No child should go uninsured. Not one. However, according to recent estimates, there are almost 400,000 uninsured children in New York State. Most of these uninsured children are eligible for Child Health Plus but continue to go uninsured, either because premiums are still too expensive or because parents remain uneducated and burdened by the application process. Many others are not covered by Child Health Plus due to federal government's denial of an SCHIP expansion. Denying children coverage is simply unacceptable. Many families do not have the means to afford purchasing private coverage for their children and are already burdened with an ever increasing cost of living. The long term costs that families absorb from medical bills form a never-ending cycle of financial stress, that in some instances lead to home foreclosures, bankruptcies, the inability to pay for college, and a reliance on the state's enormous and unsustainable Medicaid budget. It is absolutely paramount that we take the first step in providing universal coverage for all New Yorkers by covering our most important population – our children.

The way in which to provide universal coverage for the children of New York is not complicated but will require a restructuring, not of eligibility, but of a premium hierarchy. Child Health Plus needs to be slightly modified so that a formula is used to determine premium cost. Currently, there is a huge gap between a \$15/month premium and a \$150/month premium. The formula should take into account household income, family size, and healthcare expenditures so as to make coverage affordable for all

families. There will be a heavy reliance on public financing and just how much that will cost taxpayers should be evaluated when devising the formula. All children born to the state of New York should be given a Child Health Plus identification card and the application process should be completed with the birth certificate before leaving the hospital. The state of New York needs to make the insuring of our children a priority, not only for the future of the state, but also as an example for the entire country.

Providing universal coverage for adults aged 18-65 presents a more challenging policy initiative. Although a strategy similar to that of Child Health Plus would go further in adopting a universal healthcare program, a complete public program would be most likely met with large opposition or at the very least, considerable ambivalence. To that end, we need to take a smaller step; a system that synthesizes private enterprise with governmental regulation. The state should consider adopting the German healthcare system, which has been rated one of the best in the world. It entails a state health insurance program that is run by the government and is funded through employee and employer payroll deductions. Adjustments could be made to the German healthcare system to tailor it to the needs of the state and to the interests and values of its citizens. Payment into the system should be compulsory; however, there could be an option for individuals to reduce (but not eliminate) the percentage of their deductive wages if they choose to enroll into a private health insurance plan. Much more analysis is needed to determine the feasibility of such an approach here in New York.

It should be noted that this letter is not intended to be a literary review of any healthcare system or approach. It is simply a call that change is needed. We cannot allow ourselves to be ignorant of a failing healthcare system that is unsustainable and that provides inadequate screenings and treatment for so many New Yorkers. Additionally, it is of the utmost importance that we never cease to improve on our existing systems; to adopt what works and to learn from what doesn't. Behind all of this we should never lose our will to ask; what is it that we value the most? Thank you for your time and your efforts with this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Christopher J. Squillaciotti