

NEWS



S P R I N G

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Real change for real people

The quarterly newsletter of Health Care For All

HCFA Scores Victories in Initial State Budget Process; More Work Needed



Senator Edward M. Kennedy addresses an overflow crowd after accepting a 'Lifetime Achievement' award at Health Care For All's annual community leadership awards celebration, For the People, Against the Tide, April 23. More pictures, page 3.

The state fiscal year 2005 begins on July 1. Both the House and Senate completed their individual debates on the state budget for the upcoming year, and now the joint House-Senate conference committee will hash out the final recommendations to go to the Governor.

Working with the MassHealth Defense Group and the Children's Health Access Coalition, Health Care For All has already achieved some substantial victories in the budget process. Both the House and Senate included provisions to:

- ◆ repeal the authorization for MassHealth enrollment caps that were set for the HIV program, the CommonHealth program for the disabled, and the Insurance Partnership program;
- ◆ require EOHHS to compile a list of employers with many employees using MassHealth or the Uncompensated Care Pool;
- ◆ set the stage for improvements to the MassHealth dental program by seeking proposals for a third-party administrator to manage the program;
- ◆ reject harsh cuts in payments to hospitals and other providers proposed by the Governor.

We will be pushing the conferees to also include the following items, which are included only in the Senate budget, in the final budget:

- ◆ full funding for the MassHealth Essential program for low-income unemployed adults. The Senate funding covers the full 36,000 people expected to be eligible for the program, while the House appropriation only serves around 25,000.
- ◆ full funding for the Children's Medical Security Plan, which currently has a waitlist of over 14,000 kids, and the Healthy Start program for pregnant women;
- ◆ continuation of health coverage for 3,000 senior and disabled legal immigrants who will lose coverage in October without further action;
- ◆ restoration of eligibility for the HIV program to 200% of the poverty level. Last year's budget reduced eligibility for the program to 133% of poverty.
- ◆ affordable prescription drug provisions, including directing the state to establish a web site pointing Bay Staters to endorsed Canadian discount prescription drug distributors, and authorizing the Commonwealth to make discount drugs available to the uninsured and state employees covered through the Group Insurance Commission.

Health Care For All members and supporters are urged to contact their state Senators and Representatives to urge them to support these critical health access provisions in the state budget.

We need your help!

Urge your legislators to:

Provide full funding for MassHealth Essential, the Children's Medical Security Plan and Healthy Start;

Continue health coverage for senior and disabled legal immigrants;

Restore MassHealth eligibility to 200% of poverty for people with HIV;

Support affordable prescription drug provisions

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Commission Created to End Disparities

Legislation calling for the creation of a special commission to eliminate disparities was signed into law by Governor Mitt Romney on April 5, 2004. The legislation was crafted and pushed through the legislature by Health Care For All based upon earlier work with the Health Now! coalition, Critical MASS and more recent work through the Physician Diversity Project.

The special commission will convene a group of experts, stakeholders and decision makers from a range of public and private sector organizations to work collaboratively to create a state level, coordinated response to the growing problem of health disparities. It will include representation from hospitals, health plans, government officials and people from disproportionately affected communities. The goal of the commission is to develop the nation's first comprehensive statewide approach to eliminating health disparities.

Health Care For All is currently busy working with advocates and legislators to move the commission from legislation to reality. The disparities commission is closely linked to the work of the Physician Diversity Project and a central component of HCFA's work to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities.

Report Details Effects of Rising Medical Debt on Bay Staters

A new report by The Access Project details the effects of rising medical debt for patients in Massachusetts. The report, "Getting Care But Paying the Price: How Medical Debt Leaves Many in Massachusetts Facing Tough Choices," surveyed 342 patients at health centers in Codman Square and in Lynn with the assistance of the Lynn Health Task Force. Forty-one percent had medical debt from a variety of medical providers. Nearly six in 10 (59%) of those with debt said it caused them to delay getting needed care, indicating a significant barrier to health care access. The survey also reveals consequences of medical debt beyond the health care system, such as bad credit affecting people's ability to rent a home or secure a job, having to increase work hours to make ends meet, or simply having difficulty paying other essential expenses.

"The survey results undermine the common perception that health care providers and taxpayers bear all of the costs of care for uninsured and underinsured people," said Bob Seifert at The Access Project. "The patients themselves shoulder a burden as well. With health care costs rising rapidly and the number of people without adequate health insurance also increasing, the issue of medical debt is becoming more pertinent and prominent. This report underscores the challenge for policy makers."

The report and followup plans are available on The Access Project's website, www.accessproject.org.

Immigrant Youth Speak Up

As part of the campaign to restore MassHealth benefits to 10,000 legal immigrants, HCFA organized a group of 16 immigrant youth to participate in Immigrants' Day at the State House April 7. The youth came from after-school programs and high schools throughout greater Boston. After participating in a series of health care advocacy trainings, the youth shared moving stories with legislators about family members who were cut from MassHealth and clearly articulated the economic and social justice reasons why MassHealth should be restored and why immigrants should have equal access to health care. After meeting with the youth, Rep. Timothy Toomey said, "These youth should be up at the Governor's office. He needs to hear this personally." Congratulations, future health care activists!

Children's Health: HCFA, Kids Coalition Mobilize and Legislature Responds

After nearly two years of budget cuts, crucial health programs for Massachusetts children are unraveling: over 14,000 uninsured children are on a waitlist for coverage; premiums have become unaffordable for many families, and thousands of low-income women are at risk of being without needed prenatal care.

Thanks to considerable advocacy and hard work this spring by the HCFA-led Children's Health Access Coalition (CHAC), there is new hope for children's health. The House voted higher funding for programs for children and pregnant women, and the Senate Ways & Means Committee has recommended full funding. CHAC will continue working for the best possible outcome when the two versions go to Conference Committee.

For more information or to get involved in the Children's Health Access Coalition and its Children's Health Campaign, contact Stacey Auger at (617) 275-2935 or auger@hcfama.org

For the People, Against the Tide 2004



(upper left): Staff & family of STEP, one of the Community Health Leader honorees.

(upper right): John McDonough, Executive Director, Health Care For All; Leslie Walker, Executive Director of Massachusetts Correctional Legal Services; Al Troisi, Community Health Leader honoree.

(left): Phil Johnston congratulating Senator Edward M. Kennedy.



OCTOBER TRIAL DATE FOR HCFA v. ROMNEY

Federal District Court Judge Rya Zobel tentatively scheduled trial to begin October 4, 2004, in Health Care For All's lawsuit against the state over the failed MassHealth dental program. Improving access to dental services is more critical than ever with only one in three children on MassHealth receiving dental care. Health Law Advocates, HCFA's in-house law firm, brought the suit in Spring 2000 on behalf of Health Care For All and MassHealth families who have had serious problems getting dental care. The suit charges state officials with failing to provide MassHealth members with adequate access to dental services. From late 2001 to early 2003, both sides actively pursued settlement but in March of last year, the state backed out. Since then, HLA has been preparing for trial: obtaining extensive documents; lining up witnesses; securing experts, and taking depositions. The state plans to file a motion for summary judgment in an effort to eliminate many of HCFA's claims. HLA attorneys will spend the summer preparing to defend against the motion and continuing to prepare witnesses and develop a trial plan. "We feel confident that we will have the opportunity to show the court the necessity of reforming the way MassHealth operates its dental program," said HLA senior staff attorney Clare McCorrian who will argue HLA's case.

Who, what is new at HCFA

Health Care For All welcomed **Amy Pett**, community and constituent organizer, to its Community Division. Pett brings more than 30 years of journalism and organizing experience to HCFA. **Stacey Auger** moved from the Children's Division to the Policy Division where she will become HCFA's new Oral Health Campaign Coordinator. **Alex Sugerman-Brozan**, a former staff attorney at Health Law Advocates, is the new director of the Prescription Access Litigation project at our national partner Community Catalyst. And finally, we said hello to three new health advocates, all born in April: **Kai Amari Winder**, granddaughter of Helpline director Michelle Lee, **Elizabeth Derby Morton**, daughter of senior policy analyst Becky Derby, and **Harper Finley Staton-Todaro**, daughter of communications director Allison Staton. All are doing well.

HCFA's Effectiveness Lauded

In an article about state efforts to cut Medicaid programs in the March/April 2004 issue of *Health Affairs*, Health Care For All was mentioned for its effectiveness in coalition building. Authors called HCFA's ability to bring together a broad base of support for Medicaid, instrumental in winning restoration of some program cuts made last year.



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HCFA Scores Major Win for Unemployed Workers

HCFA achieved a major victory this February when the Romney administration stopped charging premiums to people in the Medical Security Plan (MSP). The MSP provides health insurance coverage to moderate and low income Massachusetts residents who are receiving unemployment benefits. Last August, a shortfall in the fund led the administration to begin charging high premiums to participants — \$86/month for individuals and \$129/month for families.

HCFA objected loudly and predicted that these premiums would drive people out of the program. Health Law Advocates represented HCFA before state officials and we contacted legislators for assistance. By November, enrollment had plunged from 24,000 to less than 11,000. Finally, in February, the administration reversed course.

Boston Globe columnist Steve Bailey drew the appropriate lesson from this experience: “The decision to roll back the premiums is one of those rare win-win-win situations. It is most obviously a win for the unemployed, who again qualify for free health insurance while they are receiving jobless benefits. In addition, it is a win for the hospitals, which were going to be stuck with the bills when the uninsured showed up at emergency rooms for care. And it is a win for the state, which gets back 50 cents on every dollar spent on the program from the federal government.”

Health Care For All has redesigned and greatly expanded its website to make it more useful for health care activists and consumers.

Check out our new look at: www.hcfama.org.

