

Social Workers Speak on Health Care

August 2009

Promoting health and improving our nation's health care system has been a priority for the social work profession and a topic of public discussion for many years. As costs for health services continue to rise for families, it is clear that significant changes to our health care system will be needed in order to close the gap of the nearly 47 million people without health insurance in America.

Social workers address the range of social, emotional and environmental problems that patients bring with them to health and mental health systems. This fact sheet highlights key health care issues, positions and service needs from the social work perspective.

The Issues ¹

Health care costs for many American families and their children are not affordable, causing people to be without health insurance.

- In 2006, 47 million people were uninsured, an increase of 2.2 million from the previous year, largely due to a decline in employer-sponsored insurance.
- Since 2004, census data indicate that employer coverage has declined, but public coverage has not increased, resulting in sharp increases in the number of uninsured adults and children.
- The Institute of Medicine found that uninsured children and adults suffer worse health and die sooner than those with insurance.

Minority and poor populations are disproportionately uninsured, but often times have the greatest need for health care.

- Almost 80 percent of people in America who are uninsured are US citizens, with minority and poor populations being disproportionately uninsured.
- Among those with health care coverage, ethnic minority groups are more likely to be enrolled in "lower end" health plans, which result in lower reimbursement levels and stricter limits on covered services.

Lack of government oversight and regulation has made obtaining services and navigating the health care system more difficult.

- Health care systems have become more complex, causing barriers and challenges for individuals who need to access and navigate their own health care benefits.
- The ability of state and local governments to finance health care for uninsured people is most limited during economic downturns, as we are currently experiencing.
- States have deregulated their health care systems and have lifted regulated rate-setting mandates on hospitals. One result has been the eliminating of many departments of social work in hospitals.

¹ National Association of Social Workers. Social Work Speaks 8th Edition. *Health Care, 2009-2012*.

What Social Workers Believe ²

- NASW supports a national health care policy that ensures the right to universal access to a continuum of health and mental health care throughout all stages of the life cycle.
- Health care policy should result in the equitable delivery of services for all people in the U.S., regardless of financial status, race, ethnicity, disability, age, gender, sexual orientation or geographic location.
- A reformed health care system must ensure an adequate supply of qualified health professionals, including social workers, that can meet the needs of existing special populations such as seniors, children and youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with disabilities.
- National health care policy should promote wellness, maintain optimal health, prevent illness and disability and provide supportive long-term palliative and end-of-life care.
- NASW also advocates policies and practices requiring that mandated medical social work services be provided by qualified social workers in all health care settings.

How Social Workers Help ³

- Social workers provide, supervise and administer services that address the range of social, emotional and environmental problems that patients bring with them to health and mental health settings.
- Social workers offer education and support to patients and family caregivers as they learn new skills and navigate the complex health care system.
- Social workers provide referral information regarding the array of community resources that may be available and assess patients for levels of distress, offering interventions such as counseling, problem-solving, skills training, and relaxation exercise.
- Geriatric social workers can be found in long-term care facilities. Home health and hospice programs employ social workers to provide home visits for assessment and counseling services. These social workers also assist patients as they cope with the long-term impact of chronic illnesses such as Alzheimer's disease.
- Diverse communities may rely on their social worker to help with discharge planning, adjustment to a mental illness or disability, provide bereavement counseling and crisis intervention services.
- All social workers are mandated abuse reporters and may coordinate care provided to victims of physical violence, child abuse, dependent adult abuse, and sexual assault. Health social workers may diagnose mental illness and substance abuse and are often involved in complex treatment coordination.
- Clinical social workers diagnose and treat mental, emotional and behavioral illnesses. They are the largest providers of mental health services in the country.
- Social work experts on health and health care reform include [Kathy Black](#), PhD, MSW, [Wendy Auslander](#), PhD, [Stephen Gorin](#), PhD, MSW, [Barry D. Walston](#), MSW, and [Diane Blum](#), MSW.

² National Association of Social Workers. Social Work Speaks 8th Edition. *Health Care, 2009-2012*.

³ National Association of Social Workers. Encyclopedia of Social Work. 2008.

What Social Workers are Saying

- **The cost of health insurance affects the poor:** *"I've had patients crying in my office because they don't know how they're going to eat this month," said **Gillian Fynn**, a licensed clinical social worker for the clinic. "One patient told me, 'Fine, I'll give my last ten dollars for copay. I just won't eat today.'" (Aug. 3, 2009. The Daily Californian. "Health Care Providers Struggle in Wake of Cuts.")*
- **Even people with insurance can't afford medication they need:** *"Many insurance companies are now offering to pay only a percentage of a drug. If you have to pay 25% when the price is \$5,000 or \$6,000 for a prescription, that's insurmountable. People just can't afford it," said **David Straseski**, lead oncology social worker for the Oncology Alliance." (Jul. 19, 2009. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "Millions more lacking health insurance.")*
- **Health care disparities impede successful health care reform:** *"Health care reform will only be successful when poverty, race, health conditions and other social factors no longer produce vast disparities in access and affordability of care for our nation's residents."-**Dr. Elizabeth J. Clark**, ACSW, MPH. (May 26, 2009. NASW Comments on Policy Option Paper #3: Financing Comprehensive Health Care Reform).*
- **Longer life spans result in increased need for access to health care:** *"Americans now live longer than ever before. Medical advances have boosted the life expectancy from less than 50 years to more than 76 years and have greatly improved the overall health of Americans in the past century. Since people are living longer, however, the number of individuals who experience higher rates of illness and disability is expected to increase dramatically."- **Lisa Yagoda, LICSW, ACSW** ("Older Adults and Health Disparities: The Impact on Access to Care." NASW Specialty Practice Sections Annual Bulletin InterSections in Practice, Volume 4, Fall 2005. www.helpstartshere.org).*
- **Arguments against universal health care are exaggerated:** *"The claim that people will have to wait longer for appointments, procedures and certain surgeries is meant to frighten. But the reality is that rationing has already begun. One reason health care is so expensive is that some of us over-utilize it. Improving our overall health care literacy will be necessary to reduce our habit of demanding expensive procedures even when they may not be clinically necessary."- **Gregory McCann, LCSW** (Jul. 20, 2009. The Gainesville Sun. (Gainesville,FL)"The debate about healthcare reform")*



Additional Resources

To learn more about how NASW has been involved in the health care reform debate, visit www.socialworkers.org/advocacy/healthcarereform

To see what other social work organizations, including NASW chapters and schools of social work are doing, visit www.socialworkportal.org and do a keyword search.

For consumer articles and information on how social workers help, visit www.helpstartshere.org “Health and Wellness” section.

About the National Association of Social Workers

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in Washington, D.C., is the largest membership organization of professional social workers with nearly 150,000 members. It promotes, develops, and protects the practice of social work and social workers. NASW also seeks to enhance the well-being of individuals, families, and communities through its advocacy.

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