

## **We Ask New Yorkers' Opinions on Health Care**

It has been said that watching legislation get enacted is like making sausage. You wouldn't want to witness either or you will be put off both for life. Never has this metaphor been more accurate than during this current war over health reform.

The news media are choked with stories – President Obama's views, Congress's plans, input from the providers, the insurance industry, pharmaceutical companies, and hundreds of other lobbyists. You can't pick up a newspaper or watch the news on television or access a media website without reading or viewing a debate about health reform. But most of the noise seems to be politicians trying to score points or talk show hosts calling people names. The details about what Congress may actually enact are in short supply.

### **Views on Affordability**

The Community Service Society (CSS) conducted a survey – “New York Statewide Poll on Health Reform, 2009” - that examined New Yorkers' views from four different regions of the state about health care costs, and their views about making health care more affordable. Lake Research Partners conducted the survey in August on behalf of CSS with 1,000 New Yorkers. Its purpose was to understand how much New Yorkers can afford to spend on health care and gauge support for various ways to increase access to affordable care. The survey was conducted in New York City, on Long Island, in upstate urban areas, and in upstate rural areas.

What we found, first and foremost, is that two-thirds of New Yorkers do not want state officials to wait and see what happens with national health reform before acting at the state level. Public officials are being sent a message by the people: Given these grim economic times – with so many families and businesses feeling squeezed - we cannot afford not to figure out an affordable health coverage option in the state right now.

They want New York officials to expand public health insurance on a voluntary basis. They also say federal proposals that would require families to pay for coverage need to be more generous with subsidies than currently proposed by Congress. These findings reinforce what we hear across the state: New Yorkers are anxious about the rising costs of health care; they are paying more, getting less, and are worried that a federal solution won't provide enough help for them. The national health reform process needs to develop a solution that will benefit everyone – including those of us, like New Yorkers, who live in high cost states. If not, then the state must step into the leadership void at the national level and produce policies that protect New Yorkers' access to health care and its affordability.

Just looking at the responses from New York City, the importance of access to health care is obvious. Twenty-two percent of city respondents in the survey said they or someone in their family has postponed getting medical care in the past 12 months because of a lack of money or insurance; 26 percent said they could not fill a prescription for the same reasons. More than two in five feel financially insecure about being able to afford their future health care needs.

The survey found that residents of New York City were willing to pay an average of \$177 a month for health insurance. Given this data, it is not surprising that 71 percent said paying \$420 per month for a family of three earning \$55,000 for health insurance – which is currently proposed in the U.S. House of Representatives’ national health reform bill – is too much. Eighty percent of New Yorkers statewide and 83 percent of New York City respondents said making health care more affordable in the state should be a high or top priority for their elected officials.

### **Public Option Support**

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of New Yorkers said they would support a new option to allow them to purchase public health insurance on a voluntary basis through existing state programs like Child Health Plus or Family Health Plus in order to make health insurance more affordable. This is consistent with other surveys that show strong support for a public health option.

New York State has led the way in health care coverage with public options - Child Health Plus and Family Health Plus – and in efforts to expand the Child Health Plus program to moderate-income families and Family Health Plus to businesses. While the federal government is struggling with a possible new national health policy, state officials should be vigilant, ensuring that, whatever the outcome in Washington, New Yorkers are able to access quality health coverage at affordable prices.

Results from the “New York Statewide Poll on Health Reform, 2009” are available on CSS’s website as [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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David R. Jones is president and CEO of the Community Service Society (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 160 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS’s website: [www.cssny.org](http://www.cssny.org).

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