



**PICO** National Network

*Unlocking the Power of People™*

**Public Comments of PICO National Network  
before the Presidential Advisory Commission on Medicaid**

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Good afternoon Chairman Sundquist and members of the Commission on Medicaid.

PICO is a national network of one thousand religious congregations working in 150 cities in 18 states to strengthen families and improve communities. PICO represents more than one million families.

We have traveled to Washington from cities and towns across the United States because our faith traditions call us to act as stewards of God's will. Our nation has been greatly blessed but that blessing is conditioned on our willingness to care for and protect those most in need.

PICO has worked for many years at a local and state level to expand access to affordable health insurance. In Santa Clara County, California we led an effort to create the first county-level program in the nation that covers all children under 300% of poverty. We have brought together unlikely partners and pursued pragmatic strategies to provide all children with seamless access to health insurance.

The good news is that while we still have more than 8 million uninsured children in our country, covering every child in America is within reach. To accomplish this awesome goal we need policy-makers in Washington to make the right choices that support local and state efforts to give all children a good start in life.

As a first step it is critical that Congress approve the President's Cover the Kids initiative. During the 2004 election President Bush called on faith-based organizations like our own to help lead an aggressive effort to enroll millions of children in health insurance. He said repeatedly that "we will not allow a lack of attention or information to stand between these children and the health care they need."

Senators Frist and Bingaman have introduced a bipartisan version of the President's Cover the Kids initiative. The Covering Kids Act of 2005 would provide \$100 million for outreach to low-income children and cut red tape to make it easier to enroll children in Medicaid and SCHIP at school.

**We ask that you include Covering Kids in your September 1st recommendations so that it is funded in the 2006 budget.** We know from years of experience and from evaluation of our work in California that faith-communities, schools and civic organizations have a unique ability to reach hard-to-reach children. Congress should make sure that campaign promises made to the most vulnerable are kept.

**The second step you can take to help us cover every child is to make sure that children are held harmless in the effort to control Medicaid spending.** We are deeply concerned that Congress is considering proposals that would move the nation backwards by eliminating rules that protect poor children and families from cost-sharing.

We have supported cost-sharing as a tool for expanding coverage to higher-income families (such as those in SCHIP). Yet we know that charging fees to poor families who depend on Medicaid will inevitably result in many fewer children getting the care they need. The Oregon experience shows the far-reaching negative consequences for all of us that result from placing financial obstacles between poor families and health care.

With all due respect we ask: Are we so morally bankrupt as a nation that we ask churches, synagogues and mosques to go forth and enroll children in health coverage, while our political leaders cut deals that will result in more children being uninsured? Raising barriers to coverage for poor children and families makes a mockery of the President's call for aggressive efforts to enroll millions of children in health coverage.

We need to remove not create new obstacles to coverage. We ask that you exercise moral and political leadership to keep in place rules against cost-sharing in Medicaid. There are other strategies available to you to control costs that do not hurt families.

We plan to closely follow the Commission's work. We expect that your final recommendations will include the steps necessary to provide all children with access to affordable health insurance.

We are meeting with our members of Congress from both parties to communicate the impact of their decisions on our children and families. Recently five hundred members of our Orlando, Florida congregations met with Senator Bill Nelson and Congressman Rick Keller to express their concerns. We are making similar contact in the 100 congressional districts and 18 states where we work so that the voices and values of faith communities are heard in Washington.

While our nation may be divided on other health issues, there is widespread agreement that all children need high quality health coverage. We need to build on the success of Medicaid and SCHIP to reach the finish line. We're happy to return to talk about how best to accomplish this goal based on our experience in the trenches. In the meantime we'll be watching to make sure children are not lost in the shuffle.