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October 14, 2009

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW
Washington, D.C. 20500
Via Fax: (202) 456-2461

Dear President Obama:

As health care reform moves forward, we urge you to ensure that Congressional proposals focus on reducing health disparities by ensuring affordable, comprehensive health care for all and advancing primary prevention. California Pan-Ethnic Health Network's (CPEHN) mission is to eliminate health disparities by advocating for public policies and sufficient resources to address the needs of communities of color. CPEHN works to ensure that all Californians have access to health care and can live healthy lives.

Ensuring Affordable Health Care

Eighty percent of California's uninsured making less than 300% Federal Poverty Level are from communities of color. If health care reform is to succeed, health coverage must be affordable. We are deeply concerned by the Senate Finance Committee's failure to include adequate subsidies and limits on cost sharing for low-income communities who will be mandated to buy health insurance coverage in the Exchange. We urge you to ensure that the final bill:

- Adopts the subsidy schedule passed by both the Senate HELP and the House Ways and Means Committees and ensures that premiums are capped at 10% of income. Out-of-pocket caps are also critical to protect families from being underinsured.
- Sets out-of-pocket caps along a sliding scale that will protect families from being underinsured.
- Adopts Senate HELP's standard that allows low-income individuals to qualify for subsidies if their employer-sponsored insurance is unaffordable.
- Expands Medicaid, Medicare, and SCHIP to include lawful immigrants (none of the current health reform bills includes a provision to expand coverage to this population).
- Preserves the safety net by ensuring adequate funds for public hospitals and community clinics to continue serving those who will not be covered under the final health reform bill.
- If individuals will be required to purchase health insurance, those who cannot find affordable coverage and are not eligible for subsidies, should be exempt from such a mandate.

Providing affordable and appropriate health coverage, including to lawfully present immigrants, will ensure healthier communities across the nation and helps us get closer to our goal of universal coverage. People with health care coverage are more likely to obtain preventive care to stay healthy and receive needed treatment for illness. Eliminating the five year waiting period for lawful immigrants will ensure that many families have access to critical health coverage.

Ensuring Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Care

Despite progress in the overall health of our nation, there are continuing disparities in the burden of illness, acute and chronic disease, injury, and mortality experienced by communities of color compared to the population as a whole. Our nation's diversity demands that we move away from a one-size-fits all model of care.

We urge you to ensure that the final health care bill adopts House bill language that would establish Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) standards for private insurers in the Health Insurance Exchange. We also ask you to strengthen language access requirements in public programs; for example, by extending to all Medicaid enrollees the "enhanced match" for language services that was enacted in CHIPRA and initiating a demonstration project to explore how Medicare could most effectively provide language services to its participants. The requirement to collect and analyze race, ethnicity, and language data, which is critically important to understanding the needs of the populations being served and targeting limited resources most cost-effectively, should remain in the final bill. Finally, the funding to expand workforce diversity grants, such as those in the House and Senate HELP bills, will go a long way to ensuring the provision of culturally and linguistically appropriate care.

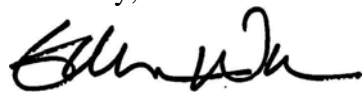
Advancing Primary Prevention

To truly address health disparities, we must also create healthier environments where we live, work, and play, and assess health in all policies. Unfortunately low-income communities of color are more likely to live in neighborhoods that lack the basic infrastructure for health, such as access to safe parks and fresh fruits and vegetables. In addition, these communities are disproportionately impacted by pollution, traffic and crime.

Studies have shown that a small investment in prevention can save billions of dollars annually in health care costs. Grant programs to build healthy communities, like those called for in both in the House and Senate HELP bills will go a long way towards ensuring that communities with the highest need have access to safe neighborhoods, affordable housing, physical activity, and nutritious foods. As legislators work to reduce the costs of health reform bills, we urge you to ensure that funding for critical prevention programs is not left out of the final bill.

Thank you again for your commitment to reforming the nation's health system. We look forward to working with you in the future on this important task.

Sincerely,



Ellen Wu
Executive Director

cc: Ann Widger, Office of Public Engagement, White House
Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary, Department of Health and Human Services