

May 22, 2009

Dear Senator:

The undersigned organizations committed to protecting and improving women's health strongly support your efforts to put forward a health care reform plan that guarantees equal access to comprehensive, high-quality, affordable health care for all. We believe that health care reform must enable individuals to maintain good health in childhood, adolescence and throughout their adult lives and senior years.

We are writing to convey our support for several important issues specifically related to reproductive health. Ensuring access to the treatments and services that comprise comprehensive reproductive health care throughout a woman's life, such as contraceptive care, maternity, pre- and post-partum care, abortion care, and screenings for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and reproductive cancers, is essential to women. Although the health care needs of women are not limited to reproductive health, it is a key determinant of their overall health. A comprehensive health care reform plan that improves women's access to affordable, quality health care, including comprehensive reproductive health services, is therefore essential to improving the health of women, families and communities.

In any health care reform legislation, access to comprehensive reproductive health services must be treated on par with access to any other primary care or preventive health services, without targeted exclusions. In fact, the majority of private health plans recognize the essential nature of reproductive health to women's overall health by including the full range of reproductive health services. Any targeted exclusions of reproductive health services could result, therefore, in many women losing coverage they currently enjoy.

As you continue to develop health care reform legislation, we urge you to ensure that any proposal reflects the centrality of reproductive health care services in women's lives and health. Specifically, we respectfully request the following:

Comprehensive benefits package: When defining essential benefits that must be covered, we ask you to ensure that the full range of reproductive health care services is treated like other primary and preventive health services and urge you to reject efforts to single out abortion care or any other reproductive health services for lesser coverage in any health benefits package. We support the creation of an entity—a commission, board, or other independent body—to determine a minimum mandatory standard benefit package based on the best available evidence and accepted standards of medical care. We believe Congress is not the appropriate body to make these critical determinations but urge you instead to establish broad parameters to guide the entity and ensure that the standard benefit package include essential categories of services such as inpatient and outpatient hospital care, medical and surgical care, ambulatory care, primary care and preventive services, and prescription drugs and devices. This outside entity should represent the interests of consumers and be empowered to make independent and evidence-based decisions based on sound science and medical standards, not politics or ideology.

Medicaid family planning expansion: Medicaid is a particularly vital source of care for women of reproductive age. In 2006, 7.3 million women in America of reproductive age (12%) relied on Medicaid for their health care coverage, including 37% of those with family incomes below the federal poverty level.

We strongly support proposals to leverage the strength of the Medicaid program and expand Medicaid access, such as those that would close the gaps in current coverage that exclude groups like childless adults and many immigrants. In doing so, we ask that Congress be careful to maintain long-standing protections for family planning services in recognition of the important role comprehensive family planning plays in meeting the preventive and primary health needs of patients. Specifically, for nearly four decades, Congress has consistently maintained family planning as a mandatory benefit under every state Medicaid program and has provided an enhanced match rate to states. Congress has also exempted Medicaid family planning services from cost-sharing and has guaranteed that patients can see their choice of family planning provider—breaking down barriers to access for millions of low-income Americans throughout the country.

In addition, we urge the Committees, in exercising their authorizing responsibilities, to ensure that Medicaid reform efforts expand access to family planning services. In particular, a Medicaid Family Planning State Option should be included, which would allow states to expand access to Medicaid-funded family planning services without going through the costly and timely Section 1115 Medicaid waiver process. President Obama included such a proposal in his FY 2010 budget as part of the Health Reform Reserve Fund and the Senate Finance Committee included expanded coverage in its options paper.

Ensuring access to care: While increasing access to health insurance coverage is a critical step toward solving our nation's health care crisis, it is not enough. Congress must also work to ensure access to a strong and diverse network of health care providers, especially essential community providers. Even with an expansion in the number of insured patients, these critically important safety net providers will continue to be a vital part of our nation's health care system. We strongly believe that in order to improve health outcomes, protections must be put in place to guarantee that low-income, medically underserved patients can access services from trusted, community-based providers, like federally qualified health centers, women's health centers, and HIV/AIDS clinics. The current 45-day wait in Massachusetts to see an Ob/Gyn is just one telling example of the ramifications of not guaranteeing access to these important providers.

As you continue to develop health care reform legislation, we urge you to ensure that any proposal takes these important steps to expand and improve women's reproductive health. We stand ready to join with you to push for enactment of such reform this year.

Sincerely,

Abortion Access Project
Abortion Care Network
ACCESS/Women's Health Rights Coalition
Advocates for Youth

American Civil Liberties Union
American Social Health Association (ASHA)
American Society for Reproductive Medicine
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals (ARHP)
Atlanta ProChoice Action Committee
Black Women for Reproductive Justice
Black Women's Health Imperative
Catholics for Choice
Center for Inquiry
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for Women Policy Studies
Childbirth Connection
Feminist Health Center of Portsmouth, Inc.
Feminist Majority
Feminist Women's Health Center, Atlanta, Georgia
Feminist Women's Health Center, Washington State
Illinois Caucus for Adolescent Health
International Women's Health Coalition
Ipas, USA
Law Students for Reproductive Justice
Legal Voice
Mabel Wadsworth Women's Health Center
NARAL Pro-Choice America
NARAL Pro-Choice Massachusetts
National Abortion Federation
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum
National Coalition for LGBT Health
National Coalition of STD Directors (NCSD)
National Council of Jewish Women
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association
National Health Law Program
National Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Women's Health Network
National Women's Law Center
Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Planned Parenthood of Nassau County
Population Connection
Power Inside
Pro-Choice Resources
Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need
Rebecca Project for Human Rights
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Religious Action Center for Reform Judaism

Reproductive Health Access Project
Reproductive Health Technology Project
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)
SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective
Southwest Women's Law Center
WCLA – Choice Matters
Women of Reform Judaism
Women's Reproductive Rights Assistance Project (WRRAP)
Women's Emergency Network
Women's Medical Fund