

## **The Truth about Immigrants and Health Care**

By Bishop John Wester

Representative Joe Wilson's now infamous "you lie" shout out to President Obama during his health-care speech to Congress was featured in the press as an unprecedented breach of protocol.

Much less has been reported about the subject of the rant: keeping undocumented persons from accessing health care.

With the passage of health-care legislation, a majority of the House of Representatives shouted back. The House bill permits undocumented persons to use their own money to purchase coverage in the new health-care exchange.

This is contrary to the stated positions of not only Representative Wilson, but also the U.S. Senate and the Obama Administration. A closer examination of the merits of the House position should convince them that, in this case, sound public policy should trump divisive politics.

With 12 million undocumented persons in the country, someone is going to need a doctor. While close to 4 million already have health care through employer-based plans, millions of others are dependent upon community clinics, emergency rooms, and the generosity of medical personnel who believe health care is a human right, not a privilege.

Although uninsured immigrants use emergency rooms much less than U.S. citizens, the cost of their care ultimately falls upon American taxpayers, either through higher insurance rates or tax money paid directly to providers. Permitting the undocumented to use their own money to purchase coverage would help alleviate some of this fiscal and financial burden on Americans.

It also would help Americans afford their own coverage. A study by the Kaiser Foundation concluded that immigrants are younger and healthier than average Americans and are less likely to access health care and drive up costs, keeping prices lower for everyone. By letting the undocumented buy into the exchange, the risks and costs of the new health-care system would be spread out among more participants.

Given a chance, they will participate. The reality is that undocumented immigrants want to pay their way, as they do with taxes, Social Security payments, and health-care contributions. Why not let them? A recent study found that 84 percent of undocumented Mexican immigrants in California offered employer-based coverage accepted it and paid for a portion of the costs.

Even for legal immigrants, Congress has yet to write the right prescription. Both the Senate and House bills fail to lift the ban, imposed in the welfare reform legislation of 1996, which prevents working but poor legal immigrants from enrolling in Medicaid for five years. Legal immigrants, who are on a path to become U.S. citizens, should be eligible for programs for which they pay taxes.

Including immigrants in health care reform would help make health care affordable to all and make us a healthier nation. It also would make coverage accessible to the most vulnerable among us. Is that not the point of health-care reform? To their credit, a majority of the U.S. House of Representatives thinks so.

In the end, the debate over immigrants and health care is really a debate about another affliction ailing our nation: the broken U.S. immigration system. In truth, without a legalization program and other reforms, our elected officials will continue to be faced with policy choices that treat U.S. citizens and immigrants differently but weaken the nation as a whole.

President Obama and Congress would be wise to include immigrants in health care reform and then enact immigration reform legislation, so that we are finally rid of the vitriolic immigration debates which have sullied our public discourse and confused our public policy decisions.

Until that time, breaches of protocol and political gamesmanship may continue to define the issue of immigration, to the detriment of all Americans. And immigrants could be left standing in the waiting room, asking for a doctor's appointment that may never come.

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