

Put seasonal spirit to work

By Frank Knapp, Jr. and Sue Berkowitz

In this holiday season we take pride in our spirit of giving and caring for those less fortunate. Unfortunately, this spiritual light has illuminated some deeply troubling attitude toward helping those in need.

Dr. Raymond Greenberg, president of the Medical University of South Carolina, wrote in a recent guest editorial (11/23/08) that Governor Mark Sanford's proposed state spending caps would be very detrimental to his agency. He cites that a spending cap on top of the budget cuts already in place will result in more "under-funding" of MUSC, which must respond with scaling back training of desperately needed health care professionals and reducing services to the people of South Carolina.

Pointing out that an unhealthy workforce increases the costs to businesses, Dr. Greenberg concludes that "increased numbers of medically underserved citizens will not promote the financial health of South Carolina."

Dr. Greenberg should have also said that spending caps on Medicaid unfairly punishes those enrolled because much of the increased costs are due to medical cost inflation, not higher utilization or (as will be pointed out later) increased numbers in traditional Medicaid.

Governor Sanford responded in his own guest editorial (11/26/08). In it the Governor reiterates his rationale for spending caps but fails to address the argument that additional cuts at MUSC will further hurt our economy and the health of our citizens. However, the Governor does not completely ignore the issue of health care and those less fortunate.

He calls spending caps "a powerful incentive for reforming unsustainable programs such as Medicaid", the health care program for the poor. The Governor says that the program is growing too fast and spending caps are the solution. "If nothing is done", says the Governor, "budget writers will continue throwing an increasing amount of money at the program."

If nothing is done???

More of our citizens are eligible for Medicaid because the Sanford administration has failed to grow our state's economy and create jobs over the last 6 years. Even before this recession our state poverty level of 15 percent and child poverty rate of 20.6 percent were at all time highs. South Carolinians' median income has decreased by about \$2000 since 2000. The number of our state's uninsured has grown to 16.2 percent largely because over 60 percent of our small businesses can't afford health insurance for their employees. And in October our state unemployment rate of 8 percent was a 25-year high, fourth-

highest rate in the nation.

Yes, Governor, something should be done. But blaming those in need by cutting off health care funding is not the “solution”. Nor, as your cabinet level agency has done, is intentionally reducing the number enrolled in Medicaid by over 1050,000 over the last two years through lack of outreach. Nor, as that same agency has done, is thwarting the Legislature’s intent to reach 70,000 uninsured low-income children through the State Children’s Health Insurance Program. Nor is your opposing every meaningful legislative effort to help small businesses afford health insurance.

The “solution” of more uninsured will only add to the financial and health problems facing citizens, businesses, communities and governments. Health care premiums will continue to increase from cost shifting and will lead to even more uninsured. Fewer Federal and state dollars invested directly into health care services will pull needed money from our depressed local economies and further reduce income and sales tax receipts. And more unhealthy workers won’t help our economic development efforts. What we need is leadership in helping to solve our state’s health insurance crisis. What we need is more jobs and more government effort in getting all our citizens insured either with private or public health insurance.

Unfortunately, the Governor’s words about programs to help those in need reveals his inner feelings a lack of understanding for what many of our citizens are currently experiencing. When the Governor cavalierly uses the phrase ‘throwing money at that program (Medicaid)’, the connotation is subtle but clear. He is disparaging the government program to help the poor those in need. He may call it a matter of governing principle but this is a thin disguise for his willingness to let the health and welfare of our citizens and businesses suffer because of his philosophical objection to government.

As we all feel a little less financially secure this holiday season, there are a growing number with far, far less. Individually we will express our concern and offer some assistance. But it is our collective voices and efforts that need to ring out and lift up the health and economy of our citizens and state. Our government is our collective voices.

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