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Health Care is a Right, Not a Privilege

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‘HEALTH CARE IS A RIGHT, NOT A PRIVILEGE.’ With these words that opened a major statement March 3, 2021, President Joseph Biden boosted the morale of advocates for the poor and the un- and under-insured around the country—not to mention the close to 30 million Americans who currently do not have health insurance. The President has given new life to the Affordable Care Act by opening, on Feb. 15, HealthCare.gov which gives Americans three months to sign up for affordable health care, which he called a “national imperative,” especially “in the midst of a deadly pandemic that has infected nearly 30 million Americans.”

The President vowed that his Administration “can’t slow down until every American has the security of mind that quality, affordable health benefits provides.” What’s more, the President’s American Rescue Plan, just passed by the House of Representatives, not only “expands access to care for all Americans,” but also “includes big steps to drive down people’s premiums.” Beneficiaries will include the long-time uninsured, but also the millions of Americans who lost their employer-funded health-care benefits due to the economic impact of the pandemic.

The Plan, hinging on federal subsidies, aims to “ensure that no one will ever pay more than 8.5 percent of their income on health coverage;” and “most Americans,” the President promises, “will pay far less.” The American Rescue Plan, insists President Biden, is “essential to defeating the pandemic, boosting “the national vaccination program to get shots into as many arms as possible as quickly as we can.”

New York City-based SOMOS Community Care warmly applauds the President’s initiatives. A network of some 2,500 independent physicians –the great majority of them primary care providers—SOMOS serves close to a million of New York City’s poorest and most vulnerable Medicaid patients living in communities of color: Hispanic Americans, African Americans and Asian Americans. Especially such communities stand to benefit from the extension and re-invigorating of Obamacare, with its expansion of Medicaid coverage.

Key to the success of the President’s health-care vision is the effective, smart use of health-care funding. Funded by the New York State Department of Health in its start-up phase and now independent, SOMOS has demonstrated its ability to make optimal use of limited budgets and achieve outstanding results. In fact, SOMOS is the only independent network of doctors in New York State to be given the Innovator designation.

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That recognition is due to SOMOS's success in its execution of the Value-Based Payment (VBP) formula, which is poised to make obsolete the fraud-prone and wasteful fee-for service model of traditional Medicaid compensation for providers. That model risks providing patients with a poorly coordinated package of services. By contrast, VBP incentivizes doctors by compensating them according to the longer-term health outcomes of their patients—and this prompts greater attention for patients on the part of physicians and a carefully coordinated treatment plan.

In fact, SOMOS primary care physicians are functioning much like family doctors of old, trusted figures who intimately know their patients as well as their families. Through a concept known as Patient-Centered Medical Home (PCMH), the primary care office becomes a point of access to a full spectrum of care, include behavioral health care and the services of specialists. The primary care doctor and his or her staff track patients' progress and ensure that they get the right kind of care when they need it.

Thanks to a team of Community Health Workers who visit family homes, SOMOS doctors also have knowledge of their patients' living and social conditions. These include housing, as well as employment, education, and criminal justice issues—the social determinants of health (SDH) which have a critical impact on patients' health and overall well-being. Considering SDH is an essential part of Value-Based Care and its provision of comprehensive, holistic health care.

In fact, SDH have an enormous impact on people's health, yet they receive but little attention in US health-care policy, in contrast to European countries. It is to be hoped that the President's health-care initiatives take SDH into account, which would be key to making health care more affordable and optimally effective.

Another crucial dimension of the SOMOS approach to VBP is cultural competence and compatibility. Most SOMOS doctors share the same ethnic background as their patients and speak the same language. That cultural affinity greatly contributes to creating a bond between doctor and patient and is a key factor in enhancing the efficacy of the patients' treatment, including their commitment to keeping their medical appointments and sticking to their medical regime at home.

Value-Based Care holds the key to affordable, quality health care. And access to such care is indeed a human right, as the President has proclaimed. It is a principle that takes on great urgency during the devastating crisis triggered by the pandemic, which has disproportionately claimed victims in poor and colored communities.



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It also should be a bipartisan principle. It should not have a particular political color but reflect the commitment of both parties—the commitment of the entire nation. As the President put it, “the American people have united in historic numbers around this plan—Democrats, Republicans, and independents alike. Now, it is up to the Senate to them, and act quickly to pass the bill.” That is exactly how it should be!

Mario J. Paredes is CEO of SOMOS Community Care, a network of 2,500 independent physicians—most of them primary care providers—serving close to a million of New York City’s most vulnerable Medicaid patients.