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Unprecedented Alliance of Health Care and Civic Leaders Announce Campaign to Help Reduce the Number of Calhoun County's Uninsured

New pilot program recruits diverse state and local organizations to expand health care coverage, starting with children and working families

Battle Creek, Mich. — An unprecedented alliance of Calhoun County's largest health care organizations together with statewide and regional partners today announced a campaign to significantly expand health coverage for Calhoun County's more than 20,000 uninsured citizens, starting immediately with expanded outreach efforts to provide coverage for children and working families in 2008.

Calling itself the Connecting Calhoun County coalition, the group is made up of more than a dozen influential state and local organizations that have played leading roles in every health policy debate of the past decade. The coalition plans to increase utilization of the health care resources available to Calhoun County citizens in need by encouraging greater use of the county's 211 Call Center. More than 15 percent of Calhoun County's 137,000 citizens do not have health insurance, almost 3 percent higher than the state average.

"We must work together to extend coverage to as many people as possible in all stages of life," Rita Klavinski, Co-Chair of the Regional Health Alliance Choose Health Issue Action Group, said during a press conference held at the Burnham Brook Community Center in downtown Battle Creek. "By forging alliances with our partners in this important endeavor, we create an unprecedented opportunity to move forward by putting the interests of Calhoun County's uninsured first."

To help kick-off the campaign, Connecting Calhoun County coalition organizers unveiled the lineup of organizations that will partner to reduce the uninsured population in Calhoun County — about 1 of every 6 county residents who have no health insurance — and promote greater use of the resources available through the 211 Call Center.

Organizations that have already committed to participate in this project include the Volunteer Center of Battle Creek, Battle Creek Community Foundation, United Way of Battle Creek, the Michigan Health & Hospital Association (MHA), Regional Health Alliance, and Calhoun Health Plan, among others. Media partners include Cumulus

Radio in Battle Creek (WBCF FM 95.3 and MIX FM 104.9), the Battle Creek Enquirer, WWMT CBS TV 3 in Kalamazoo, Comcast and CBS Outdoor Advertising.

“The lack of affordable health insurance among thousands of Calhoun County residents puts families at financial risk and places financial stress on health care providers and employers because we all pay for the costs of caring for the uninsured through higher insurance premiums,” said Brenda Hunt, President and CEO of the Battle Creek Community Foundation. “We hope Connecting Calhoun County will serve as a model to communities across Michigan who desire to extend health care coverage to their citizens.”

A 2007 report released by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation shows since 1997, employer offerings of health insurance to parents with modest incomes have fallen three times as fast as offerings to parents who earn more money. The figures underscore that working parents in Michigan who earn modest incomes are experiencing a dramatic erosion in employee benefits. As a result, uninsured children — who represent nearly 13 percent of the state’s uninsured population — are going without needed health care.

“It is a tragedy that our community’s most vulnerable citizens do not have access to health insurance,” said Kate Segal, chair of the Calhoun County Board of Commissioners.

“Every day of every week, hospital emergency rooms in Calhoun County treat untold scores of patients whose illnesses have become serious and life threatening simply because they lack coverage and cannot afford primary care,” Segal added. “Coverage is the key — maintaining the status quo in Calhoun County is simply not acceptable.”

Nationally, fewer than half [47 percent] of parents in families earning less than \$40,000 a year are offered health insurance through their employer — a nine percent drop since 1997. Meanwhile, offers of health insurance to parents who earn more than \$80,000 or more have held steady at about 78 percent. The analysis shows more than half of uninsured kids in Michigan [57 percent] live with adults who earn modest incomes, calculated at less than \$40,000 for a family of four.

“Currently, more than 1 million Michigan citizens, or 11 percent of the population, are without health insurance of any kind,” said David Seaman, Executive Vice President of the Michigan Health & Hospital Association (MHA). “Getting children, families and individuals the health care coverage they need is critical to the future of our great state.”

Many of these uninsured children would likely be eligible for free or low-cost insurance coverage through the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (S-CHIP) — called MICHild in Michigan — which Congress has funded through March 2009. Signed into law in 1997, S-CHIP provides each state with federal funds to design a health insurance program for vulnerable children.

The eight-month Connecting Calhoun County initiative will include a large and coordinated outreach effort, creating awareness about existing health resources available in Calhoun County and encourage uninsured residents to the 211 Call Center, where staff will direct them to existing health care plans for which they qualify, according to Samantha Pearl, Executive Director of the Calhoun Health Plan.

“The uninsured in our community includes all ages, all levels of education, and any possible life situation you can imagine,” Pearl said. “Calhoun County is going to keep working together to ensure that every resident in our community has access to essential health services.”

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