

October 24, 2003

The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love the stranger as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
Leviticus 19: 33-34

Dear Medicare Conferee,

As people of faith, we believe that the Biblical mandate to “love our neighbors as ourselves” extends to the strangers, or the immigrants, among us. Recalling the stories of strangers in our scriptures and recognizing the contributions of immigrants to our country, we urge you to support the provision in S. 1 that would restore health care benefits to immigrant children and their mothers.

Since 1996, legal immigrants who have been in the U.S. for less than five years have been denied access to federally-funded health care, even though they work hard, pay taxes and play by the rules to come to our country. Children are barred from health coverage under State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) and pregnant women are ineligible for prenatal care under Medicaid.

In addition, the 1996 restrictions have forced non-profit, faith-based clinics that serve immigrants to conduct costly and time-consuming status checks. For those who feel that they are called to “love the stranger” as themselves, it is heartbreaking to turn away people who are in need and who are in the U.S. legally.

As people of faith, we urge you to reverse the 1996 rulings, by supporting the Immigrant Children’s Health Improvement Act (ICHIA) provisions in Section 605 of the Senate Medicare bill. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that ICHIA would restore health care to 155,000 children and 60,000 pregnant women per year.

ICHIA would also provide fiscal relief to states. While immigration policy is determined by the federal government, it is the states that most often pick up the tab for immigrant social services. States also pay for costly emergency room visits, the treatment of last resort for immigrants who are denied preventive care. For this reason, it is likely that paying up front for immigrant health care would save money in the long run.

Extending benefits to legal immigrants makes sense financially, and as people of faith, we submit that it also makes sense morally. As you negotiate Medicare in the next weeks, we urge you to keep in mind the Biblical mandate to love our neighbors (no matter how new) as ourselves.

Sincerely,

American Baptist Churches USA
Church Women United
Episcopal Church USA
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Jewish Council of Public Affairs
Justice and Peace/Integrity of Creation Office,
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate
Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington
Office

National Council of Churches USA
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice
Lobby
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Washington Office
Union of American Hebrew Congregations
United Church of Christ Justice and Witness
Ministries
Women of Reform Judaism