

May 4, 2009

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

The undersigned organizations applaud you for making health care reform a top priority in light of the many challenges facing our nation. We share your commitment to reforming our nation's health care system and are encouraged by the promise that an improved system holds for everyone. However for health reform to truly succeed, every person – regardless of race or ethnicity – must be afforded equal access to quality care. **Therefore, we believe it is critically important that health reform include a comprehensive set of principles designed to eliminate the health disparity gap that exists for racial and ethnic minorities.**

In 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that nearly one-third of Americans identified themselves as a racial or ethnic minority. By 2050, the Census Bureau projects the proportion will grow to nearly half of all Americans. The ground-breaking 2003 Institute of Medicine (IOM) report, *Unequal Treatment*, demonstrated that minority populations have been left behind in access to timely, quality health care services and positive health outcomes. And while the most recent Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality National Healthcare Disparities Report showed some progress in reducing disparities, the overall picture remains the same – the gaps in access to care and quality of care continue to grow.

As your administration and Congress consider fundamental reform of our nation's health care system, now is the appropriate time to ensure the delivery of quality, cost effective care for minority populations and implement measures that will improve cultural competency and language access to health services, eliminate barriers to health care, and build a more diverse health care workforce. **The undersigned organizations agree upon the following three priorities as essential to eliminating the health disparity gap and improving health care for minority populations.**

**Priority 1: Support improvements in health care delivery designed to eliminate disparities in health care for minority populations.**

- Provide tangible incentives for community health centers, urban and rural safety-net hospitals, primary and specialty physician groups, and post-acute health care providers to organize systems of care that can achieve greater continuity and timeliness of care for minority populations. Support the development of clinical information system connections among those entities and providers to improve quality of care.
- Provide resources to support the collection, reporting, and use of race, ethnicity, and primary language data to reduce health care disparities. Initiatives should include the

development and demonstration of information systems that integrate provider-level information with demographic data. Public health data should be captured to identify target areas and evaluate outcomes.

- Fund the development and careful testing of Medicare pay-for-performance measures that assess care provided to minorities under both the original Medicare program and the Medicare Advantage program.

**Priority 2: Develop and expand the health care workforce to improve the availability of needed practitioners in minority and underserved communities.**

- Increase significantly the numbers of primary care professionals – physicians, advanced practice nurses and physician extenders, pharmacists, mental health practitioners and other mental health professionals, dentists, patient navigators, and community health workers. The means: increased funding to health professions schools and programs that have demonstrated success and/or commitment to recruiting and graduating a diverse student population.
- Develop incentives to embed cultural competency training in medical, health professions, and health management training programs. Alliances with medical schools, health professions schools, residency programs, the Association of American Medical Colleges and American College of Healthcare Executives, and others directly involved in preparing the next generation of health care practitioners, providers, and managers will be required.
- Modify the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) program to improve the placement of health practitioners in minority and underserved communities, including:
  - A pilot project to change the NHSC admission criteria to place more emphasis on emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity, and less on academic standing.
  - Significantly expand the availability of funds to forgive the indebtedness of practitioners willing to practice in minority and underserved areas.
  - Better match NHSC candidates with specific geographic areas and cultures of interest to them.
- Reevaluate the impact of the definition of medically underserved areas on a variety of underserved areas (such as inner city pockets) to ensure that funding and placement programs tied to that definition do not inappropriately exclude communities that are truly underserved.

**Priority 3: Eliminate other barriers to access for minorities**

- Provide coverage for and access to health care services for all.

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- Provide funding to address the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the disparities gap and that would help minorities seek the right care at the right time from the right providers.
- Provide resources to train already practicing health care providers and other health care workers on how to deliver culturally competent care to improve their ability to work with patients and families in achieving better care outcomes.
- Provide coverage for language services for patients who have limited English proficiency, are functionally illiterate, or are deaf or hard of hearing to reduce patient care errors, improve communication with patients, and thereby reduce disparities.

Thank you for your steadfast commitment to improving our country's health care system and the health of all Americans. We look forward to working with your administration and Congress to enact a comprehensive health reform plan that will make health care equity a reality.

Respectfully yours,

Aetna

AIDS Action

American Academy of Nursing

American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

American Association of Pastoral Counselors

American Diabetes Association

American Heart Association/American Stroke Association

American Hospital Association

American Medical Association

American Nurses Association

Association of Language Companies

Child Welfare League of America

Japanese Americans Citizens League

National Association of Counties

National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)

National Black Nurses Association

National Coalition of Ethnic Minority Nursing Organizations

National Health Law Program

National Hispanic Medical Association

National Immigration Law Center

National Medical Association

National Urban League

National Women's Law Center