

**Testimony of Congreso de Latinos Unidos
Before Pennsylvania Medicaid Listening Tour**

Presented by: Varsovia Fernandez
Vice President of External Affairs

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Thank you Secretary Richman, members of the Cabinet, General Assembly and experts on Medicaid policy and practice for bringing this Medicaid Listening Tour to Philadelphia; and for granting Congreso de Latinos Unidos the privilege to testify before you today on the important topic of the Medical Assistance program in Pennsylvania. I serve as vice president of external affairs for Congreso de Latinos Unidos (Congreso), the largest and leading Latino social services and workforce development community-based not for profit agency in Pennsylvania. Congreso served over 22,000 customers last year of which 75% are Medicaid customers.

Low income Latinos have less access to employer-sponsored health care, hence the critical importance of the Medicaid safety net for those who cannot afford private health care coverage. The state of Pennsylvania faces an aging population largely dependent on Medicaid, a challenging budget with decreasing federal revenues and the ever increasing health care costs. Congreso believes that these issues can be addressed by increasing awareness of health prevention and wellness programs, community service, and creative ways that help providers decrease costs.

Obesity and chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, HIV/AIDS, and asthma are predominant among Latinos, the fastest growing segment of our population. It is reasonable to say that the fact that Latinos have limited access to employer-based health care costs has direct impact on the financial burden of the health care cost crisis we are currently facing. A positive aspect of this increasing risk to Medicaid finances is that Latinos are a younger population, which allows for preventive health and wellness education promotion. These diseases are generally caused by ignorance, poor diet, physical inactivity or sedentarism, and in-house environmental issues. Congreso has been successful with health prevention programs implemented through outreach and education designed for staff and volunteers to provide workshops that teach customers about healthier eating and exercise. Programs have helped decrease the risk of asthma by providing in home education to empower customers to create and maintain a healthier house environment that reduce asthma and upper respiratory disease causing agents. Other programs have adopted culture-oriented techniques

that motivate or encourage customers to attend exercise and cooking classes by adding music and nutritional foods attractive to their culture. Salsaerobics is a good example of this with customers who have lost as much as 50 pounds in three months. These programs could be expanded to serve a broader base of low-income customers by creating an initiative formed by a welfare recipient community service program.

Madame Secretary, and members of the panel, Medicaid and welfare benefits make a difference by protecting the quality of life of many people and helping them follow a path to self-sustainability. Many Pennsylvanians reap the benefits of our welfare system at a time when they need it most. Why wouldn't they give back to the system that helps them? We urge you to give serious consideration to exploring mandatory community service as a potential cost-effective strategy in the areas of health prevention and wellness. Volunteering commitments from Medicaid recipients who are able to work a few hours a week can make a reasonable difference in Medicaid finances. Potential benefits include:

- Cost-savings for the institutions employing volunteers, including: local county offices, hospitals, community-based organizations, nursing homes, or assisted living facilities.
- Certain welfare recipients would become part of the solution to Pennsylvania's Medicaid budget crisis and provide them with a sense of contributorship while teaching them civic responsibility.
- Cost-savings to the Department of Public Welfare's (DPW) personnel expense.
- Health care cost savings triggered by healthier living habits and awareness.

Community service workers would become instrumental in launching a long-term campaign addressing nutrition and healthier living through a variety of tactics such as workshops, outreach, and distribution of literature through target marketing initiatives starting with children to effectively break poor eating habits and instill exercise activity disciplines. A mandatory community service program approach would not only become part of the solution to balancing the Medicaid budget, but it can be helpful to DPW's mission to increase the quality of life of Pennsylvanians by increasing their sense of responsibility. It is unclear at this juncture what cost-savings to DPW would be after implementing this

proposed solution, but according to the Center for Disease Control the cost to prevent diabetes in the United States is \$200 billion a year. It is also worth noting that the World Bank estimates obesity-related costs account for over 12% of our national healthcare costs. Considering that diabetes, asthma, HIV/AIDS, and heart disease are predominant among Latinos and the Latino population growth rate, I would say that deploying community service recruits to teach children and youth about healthier eating and regular exercise would save the state significant dollars.

While community service and health prevention and wellness may be a good solution to Pennsylvania's growing healthcare and Medicaid crisis, Congreso recognizes that many welfare recipients are unable to participate for various reasons, including: disability, behavioral health, & chronic illness. That's why we propose exploring solutions that include other stakeholders such as health care providers and insurance companies. While the thought may seem simple, this option has severe implications and a complex web of probabilities. Do providers have a responsibility to protect their tax payment investment in welfare programs by giving back for the sake of quality care and economic stability? Congreso believes that they do.

Congreso's position is that providers could find it in their books and systems to contribute to Pennsylvania's Medicaid crisis. In fact, we believe that tax incentives may motivate providers to collaborate in providing a solution that would allow for cost-effective strategies that would lower overall healthcare costs and create savings to Medicaid. Partnerships with medical schools and business administration programs where students help with basic health care provider and administrative services could contribute to the bottom line, as would suppliers partnerships that reduce costs. Potential benefits include:

- Cost-savings for the institutions where students perform internships and residency programs because professional fee costs are lowered.
- Increased experience for students participating on interships and residency programs, which eventually increases the quality of care.
- Tax deductions through interships and residency incentive programs to institutions using students to provide basic services.

- Tax deductions through cost-effective supplier and discounts partnerships, including manufacturers.

Members of the panel, we also suggest that the Department of Welfare look deeper into the various inter-agencies operations systems. Currently, a social security recipient supplementing income with SSI qualifies for \$10 to \$30 dollars worth of Food Stamps, yet the Food Stamps program is underutilized. Provided the undergoing energy crisis, and the threat to discretionary spending, it may be worthwhile to look at a more integrated service model using a holistic approach to customers needs. There may be ways to take a harder look at the needs and opportunities of welfare recipients through integrated systems. This is a problem that could potentially be addressed by aligning the business systems and policies within the operations of the various departments.

In closing I wish to state that Congreso is not a Medicaid or budget expert and while it wasn't easy to find meaningful suggestions toward solutions to our Medicaid budget deficit, we found a sense of hope in your Listening Tour, a sense that each of you materialized for us today by allowing Congreso to deliver a collective message that extends beyond the Latino community in Pennsylvania. We face welfare recipients issues day to day. As a social services and workforce development services organization, and as members of the Philadelphia community, Congreso de Latinos Unidos is motivated to continue working with you and stakeholders to support your work toward solutions that help Pennsylvanians from all walks of life receive the most basic benefit of living in good health.

Once again, and on behalf of Congreso de Latinos Unidos and its constituency I thank you for the opportunity to bring our voice to this Medicaid Listening Tour.