

Raising Women's Voices for the health care we need

A collaborative initiative of the Avery Institute for Social Change,
the MergerWatch project of Community Catalyst
and the National Women's Health Network

Women's Vision for Quality, Affordable Health Care for All

Why a women's vision?

Women have much at stake in the debates over health care reform at the local state, national levels. The current American health care system has consistently failed to provide access to needed care for many girls and women. It has also created tremendous challenges for the women who coordinate health care for our families. The reasons for these failures are complex. Any successful comprehensive reform plan must address such issues as affordability, eligibility, portability, quality, continuity of care, cultural competency, health care disparities, family dynamics and the willingness of health care institutions and individual health professionals to provide requested services.

Which women have helped shape this vision?

Raising Women's Voices collaborators have been conducting small-group discussions with women from all age groups and from a range of racial, ethnic and economic backgrounds, as well as diverse sexual identities. We have asked about their experiences with the health care system and, based on those experiences, what kinds of changes they would like to see. We have spoken with teenagers learning about their bodies and sexuality; young women navigating the transition from education into the workforce and the health insurance transition that accompanies that life-change; new mothers, reflecting on the experience of childbirth; recent immigrants to this country, women who are victims of domestic violence; women who have suffered divorce or widowhood; middle-aged women struggling to coordinate care for older relatives; as well as older women coping with chronic illnesses. Their thoughtful answers have informed the principles of this vision for health care.

What kinds of health reform do these women want?

Five central principles have emerged from these conversations. A health care reform plan rooted in these principles will better meet the health care needs of women and our families as seen from a practical, "kitchen table" perspective. It will also create a health system that serves many different communities and ensures our collective health. Most importantly, these principles will empower us to raise our voices and explicitly define women's vision for quality, affordable health care for all.

Principles for Quality, Affordable Health Care for All

I. KEY PRINCIPLE: Health care coverage must be affordable and always available for women, our families and our communities.

Accordingly, health reform must:

1. Ensure that health insurance coverage and any co-payments or deductibles are affordable. Individuals and families may be expected to contribute to the cost of health coverage, but such contributions should be consistent with their ability to pay, possibly through a sliding scale payment program or tax system based on income;
2. Prohibit disqualification of any individual for health insurance coverage based on a pre-existing condition, such as (but not limited to) pregnancy, asthma, arthritis, diabetes or cancer;
3. Ensure that health coverage is available throughout one's lifespan, and is not interrupted by such life transitions as divorce, widowhood, changing jobs or moving from college into the job market;
4. Ensure that health coverage is available to everyone, regardless of income, age, and immigration or familial status.

II. KEY PRINCIPLE: Health care plans must provide the acute, preventive, chronic and supportive health care services that women, our families and our communities need.

Accordingly, health reform must:

5. Ensure provision of the full range of reproductive and women's health services. Such services include, but are not limited to, maternity care, pre- and post- natal care, abortion, contraception, treatment and prevention of sexually transmitted infections, and fertility treatment;
6. Offer voluntary access to preventive care that has been shown to improve health, including such services as vaccinations, childbirth education, smoking cessation programs, fitness programs, vision and hearing exams, pharmaceuticals and the appropriate range of treatment options. Additionally such access should include age-appropriate screening tests that have been shown to improve clinical outcomes, such as mammograms, pap smears, cancer screening, treatment options, appropriate reconstructive surgery as well as blood pressure and cholesterol screening;
7. Include comprehensive dental coverage for both children and adults;

8. Include comprehensive mental health services that are not limited to drug therapy, as well as such ancillary therapies as physical, speech and occupational therapy;
9. Provide support for family care givers and offer services such as adult day-care, respite care and home care that enable elderly and differently-abled adults the ability to avoid unnecessary hospitalization or institutional living;
10. Promote the availability of time-intensive health care services, such as obstetrics, geriatrics and primary care, by appropriately valuing these in reimbursement systems;
11. Include comprehensive sexuality education as a core component of health care services. Sexuality education and related clinical services can save the lives of young people and empower them to make healthy choices through out their lives.

III. KEY PRINCIPLE: The health care system overall, and any health care plans within it, must be consumer friendly and transparent.

Accordingly, health reform must:

12. Provide low-literacy, easy-to-understand guides in multiple languages regarding the services and health providers included in the plan. In addition, health plans should offer toll-free help-lines and other types of assistance for understanding coverage options;
13. Ensure an effective process by which patients' records and histories are documented and transferred between providers and institutions without compromising confidentiality. Patients themselves should have access to these record, as well.

IV. KEY PRINCIPLE: Health care must be culturally competent and respectful of the needs and perspectives of patients from diverse communities.

Accordingly, health reform must:

14. Respect the ethical, moral and religious viewpoints of the patient;
15. Provide services that are respectful of people of any gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, as well as physical and mental ability;
16. Offer readily accessible translation services whenever necessary.
17. Actively work to eliminate racial and ethnic disparities as well as disparities due to sexual or gender identity in health status and use of health care services.

V. KEY PRINCIPLE: We must ensure high quality health care, with quality defined as the degree to which health services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge.

Accordingly, health reform must:

18. Make determinations about what care and services will be covered based on conscientious use of current best evidence to ensure high quality care. This evidence must incorporate the concerns of diverse constituencies of women and support efforts to address what works and what does not work for different groups of patients;

19. Assist women and families in making informed decisions about medical care with knowledge of the full range of treatment options available to them, and the potential risks/benefits and costs of more invasive or high-tech approaches. So, for example, women can be enabled to make informed decisions about maternity care if they are provided with childbirth education, information about the instances in which cesarean section deliveries are appropriate or unnecessary and are offered a variety of safe birthing options;

20. Assist women and families in choosing the most appropriate level of provider and health care setting. So, for example, women preparing to give birth should be offered and access to midwife and doula services.