

UNIQUE SOUTH CAROLINA NETWORK CREATES NEW HOPE FOR AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE

Rep. Jim Clyburn, Guest columnist

National advocates and other states looking for a public-private solution to healthcare challenges for limited-income, working uninsured, are turning to South Carolina for answers.

Only South Carolina has been successful in organizing both a network of volunteer healthcare providers and a central fill, mail-order pharmacy, solely for the purpose of serving the working uninsured. South Carolina residents have a healthcare safety net that is simply not present anywhere else in the country.

On Tuesday, April 10, 2007, I had the privilege of addressing a joint session of the South Carolina General Assembly. I talked about my hopes for South Carolina, referencing our State motto, "While I breathe, I hope". Today, I want to talk about the hopes of the working uninsured, one of the most overlooked populations in my District and in the State. The working uninsured are ordinary people working hard to support themselves and their families, without the safety net of affordable access to healthcare. There are over 360,000 working uninsured residents in South Carolina and they are hoping that this country's leadership hears and responds to their plight.

I have been a long-time supporter of healthcare issues, introducing legislation on topics ranging from establishing health empowerment zone programs in communities that experience disparities in health status and health care, to expanding the number of individuals and families with health insurance coverage. In my district, also known as "the stroke belt" of the State, I regularly sponsor health fairs, educating my constituents on the importance of diet, exercise and appropriate health screenings for diabetes and hypertension. One organization that participates in all of my health fairs, and has assumed a key leadership role in creating access to affordable healthcare for all South Carolinians, is Communicare.

Communicare is a non-profit organization in South Carolina, providing medical referrals and a statewide prescription assistance program. Since 1993, they have served the working uninsured, a population that typically "falls between the cracks" of subsidized healthcare programs and private insurance.

In the Communicare prescription assistance program, patients are working but cannot afford, or do not have access to, employer-sponsored health insurance. And because they work, they do not qualify for Medicaid or other subsidized programs. Unfortunately, all it takes is one chronic illness to destroy a household budget, or even worse, may lead to actual job loss. At that point, a tax-paying citizen becomes a user of tax-supported social

services and medical care, and according to Communicare, that is *unnecessary* and *avoidable*.

When the working uninsured become ill, most turn to their local hospitals' emergency rooms for primary care, which is expensive and lacking in coordinated follow-up care to manage a chronic illness. Job loss can soon follow when preventable illnesses like high blood pressure and diabetes go untreated or are not consistently managed by a regularly engaged provider. I know this happens in my district where Communicare serves over 3,000 of my constituents, and I enthusiastically support their plans to expand their services to serve even more.

Communicare makes a good point when they say, “We believe that when South Carolina residents work hard to support themselves and their families and still cannot afford healthcare, something is wrong systemically.” And I agree with them that while fixing the entire system is not an achievable goal at the moment, they *have* created an affordable solution to accessibility.

Communicare has established unparalleled partnerships with medical providers, free clinics, hospital-affiliated clinics, pharmacies and pharmaceutical companies to create a network that makes healthcare accessible and affordable. The results are astounding. Their 11 pharmaceutical companies donated over 355 types of name-brand prescription medications, valued at \$30 million, which was then dispensed to over 14,000 working uninsured in 2006. Over 2,500 volunteer healthcare providers donated an estimated \$1 million in healthcare services to their patients, diverting *preventable* health emergencies from South Carolina emergency rooms and saving tax dollars on uncompensated care and other social services.

In my speech to the South Carolina General Assembly, I said, “It is time we come together as South Carolinians and as Americans.” Communicare has done that by taking an entrepreneurial approach to solving the healthcare crisis, based on the belief that if everyone shares the burden, the needs of working uninsured can be met. This innovative prescription assistance program has become a National model for dispensing medication to the working uninsured and *it works*. Maybe now it is time to ask, “Should South Carolina be the only state with a working solution?” What started as a small grassroots program now has a proven track record of success. Do we dare to start thinking *big*? Remember again our State’s motto: “While I breathe, I hope.” Many working uninsured citizens are hoping for affordable healthcare, and there is no good reason for us not to make healthcare accessible and affordable to *all* Americans?

For more information on Communicare, visit www.communicare.org or call 1-800-763-0059.