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UNTIL

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BALTIMORE NON-PROFITS RELEASE REPORT CARD ON LOW-INCOME HEALTHCARE

~ Survey Shows Access to Care Remains Poor Despite an Increase in the Number of People with Publicly Funded Health Insurance Like Medicaid~

PRESS CONFERENCE

August 5, 10:00 - 11:00 a.m.

Franciscan Center

101 W. 23rd Street

Baltimore, Maryland

*****Note to editors:** *State Delegate Dr. Dan Morhaim and low-income Baltimore residents will be on hand at the press conference to discuss the findings.****

BALTIMORE –An annual low-income healthcare report card to be released on Thursday finds that large numbers of low-wage Baltimoreans are struggling to access basic medical care for themselves and their families despite an increase in the number of respondents who said they had publicly funded health insurance, typically Medicaid.

This is the fourth year in the row that the Open Society Institute–Baltimore and Baltimore REACH, a network of eight community clinics and resource centers promoting social justice and community health in Baltimore, have conducted the Baltimore Safety Net Access to Care Survey. The survey examines the state of healthcare for the city's destitute and disadvantaged residents.

This year, the percentage of respondents without publicly funded insurance, typically Medicaid, fell to 44.1%, which is down from 47.1% in 2003 and 59.5% in 2001. At the same time, the number of people reporting difficulty accessing primary or other types of specialized care is on the rise. For instance, the percentage who said they had trouble finding dental care jumped from 40.7% in 2003 to 58.2% this year.

“Low-income Baltimore families are facing a healthcare ‘catch-22,’” said OSI-Baltimore Program Officer and study author Dr. Thomas O’Toole. “More people are becoming insured, yet at the same time access to basic care is harder than ever.”

The overwhelming reason for lack of access was the unaffordable cost of care. Over half of all respondents reported having a medical debt with the overall reported average debt level approaching \$5,000 per person. Yet respondents’ yearly average salary was just \$9,498. Moreover, billing delays and long waiting periods to enroll in insurance had a strongly negative impact on health-seeking behavior. Many people said that while they were uninsured or waiting for insurance they stopped taking necessary medications and visiting their physician or ended up in the city’s emergency rooms for urgently needed care.

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"The data verifies our anecdotal evidence that it is increasingly difficult for low-income people to survive in Baltimore without relying on already burdened social services, the health care safety net of low-cost clinics and charity programs," said Barbra Levin, executive director of Baltimore REACH. "Helping families access assistance is not enough. We need to ensure that all Baltimoreans have basic medical care, and in a timely manner. To date that is not happening."

Other key findings from the survey, conducted during June and July, 2004, of 260 Baltimore residents attending eight community clinics and resource centers, include:

- More than three-quarters (77.8%) of respondents had at least one chronic medical problem like hypertension, asthma and other respiratory problems. Yet the cost of care kept approximately 4 out of 10 people from receiving primary or specialty care and 3 out of 10 from accessing mental health treatment.
- More than 7 out of 10 people interviewed were supposed to be taking prescribed medications. Yet almost 40% of people who had lost their insurance said they stopped taking needed medications or going to a doctor when they were uninsured.
- Fifty-five percent of the sample had been without insurance at some point during the past two years. On average, they were uninsured for 19.4 months during that time period.

State Delegate Dr. Dan Morhaim, who represents Baltimore County, will join medical students who conducted the survey and low-income Baltimore residents who will talk about their experiences navigating the health system at the press conference.

Copies of the report will be available at the press conference and on OSI-Baltimore's web site at <http://www.soros.org/baltimore/>.

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Baltimore REACH is a healthcare consortium promoting social justice and community health in Baltimore. Its members include: Beans and Bread Outreach Center, Chase Brexton Health Services, Franciscan Center, Healthcare for the Homeless, Health Education Resource Organization, Paul's Place, St. Michael's Outreach Center, and The Shepherd's Clinic.

The Open Society Institute is a private operating and grantmaking foundation that promotes the development of open society around the world. OSI's U.S. Programs seek to strengthen democracy in the United States by addressing barriers to opportunity and justice, broadening public discussion about such barriers, and assisting marginalized groups to participate equally in civil society and to make their voices heard. U.S. Programs challenge over-reliance on the market by advocating appropriate government responsibility for human needs and promoting public interest and service values in law, medicine, and the media. OSI's U.S. Programs support initiatives in a range of areas, including access to justice for low and moderate income people; independence of the judiciary; ending the death penalty; reducing gun violence and over-reliance on incarceration; drug policy reform; inner-city education and youth programs; fair treatment of immigrants; reproductive health and choice; campaign finance reform; and improved care of the dying. OSI is part of the network of foundations, created and funded by George Soros, active in more than 50 countries around the world.