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HEALTH INSURANCE SYSTEM FAILS BALTIMORE'S LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

Survey Shows Massive Numbers of Uninsured & Long Delays for Public Assistance

PRESS CONFERENCE

***Wednesday, July 30, 2003 at 10 a.m.
Health Education Resource Organization, Inc.
Maryland Community Resource Center
1734 Maryland Avenue
Baltimore, MD 21201***

BALTIMORE – More than 80% of Baltimore's low-income, poor and homeless families reported being uninsured in the recent past according to a new study sponsored by the Open Society Institute-Baltimore and the Baltimore Community Health Consortia. The study will be released at a press conference at the Health Education Resource Organization (HERO) on Wednesday at 10 a.m.

The Baltimore Safety Net Access to Care Survey, conducted by Dr. Thomas O'Toole, found that almost half the people interviewed had to stop taking their prescription medications and seeing their doctors after losing health coverage. Large numbers reported visiting hospital emergency rooms because they could not afford preventative care.

“The really scary thing is how many people have experienced being uninsured and what happens to them when they lose their insurance,” said O'Toole, a program officer at the OSI-Baltimore. “To me, it is the wake up call that our system is broken. Basically, you pay now or you pay later and Baltimore has chosen to pay later. That has significant health and social consequences – and costs.”

The survey, conducted during June and July, 2003, of 298 Baltimore City residents attending 10 community clinics and resource centers, also showed:

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- Seventy percent of respondents had at least one chronic medical problem. More than six out of 10 were supposed to be taking prescribed medications.
- Almost half of those interviewed (47.1%) were currently without health insurance, and 82.6% had experienced episodes of being uninsured recently. During these periods, 42.7% reported they stopped taking medications or going to the doctor.
- More than half reported currently owing money for a medical expense, with an average reported debt per person of \$8,655. This debt is substantially higher than the average annual income reported in this survey and much higher than the same data for 2002, in which 47.2% of people reported a medical debt averaging just \$3,409.
- Nearly one-third of respondents reported that they had to wait four weeks or less to receive medical assistance once they applied, 36.5% reported waiting one to three months and 24.3% reported waiting from four months to more than one year.
- While waiting for their medical assistance application to be processed, 43.7% reported they went to an emergency room for care instead of a doctor's office or clinic, 32.1% stopped taking prescribed medications because they could not afford them, and 21.4% became more ill because they could not get the care they needed.
- Many respondents said they sought health care at community clinics (62.0%) where 66.8% reported receiving free or discounted care. Other popular sources of care included: emergency departments (56.4%) where only 22.6% said they received free care or discounted care; hospital-based clinics (38.3%) where 30.7% said they received free or discounted care; and private physician's offices (32.6%) where 32.0% reported receiving free or discounted care.

Along with two medical students who were part of the team conducting the survey, three low-income Baltimore residents who have had difficulty navigating the health system will talk about their personal experiences at the press conference.

“Baltimore has a growing safety net of low-cost health care providers that offer timely, affordable care,” said Bill McLennan, chairman of the Baltimore Community Health Care Consortia. “But we can’t do it alone. Health insurers need to step up and the state needs to make it easier for low-income people to get coverage.”

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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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

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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.

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