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HOW TO CONTINUE HEALTH CARE PROGRESS IN MARYLAND

An Op-ed by Vincent DeMarco & Gene Ransom in The Baltimore Sun, 4/16/2015

BALTIMORE, April 16, 2015 — At the beginning of this year's legislative session, the prognosis for quality, affordable health care in Maryland was unclear. Newly elected Governor Larry Hogan had proposed a number of cuts to critical programs, the funding mechanism for our health insurance marketplace was up in the air and uncertainty in Congress clouded the future of the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

Now, with the 2015 General Assembly Session just ended, we have made some substantial progress. The General Assembly has done its job. But now, Governor Hogan must act to keep Maryland's health care progress going. We strongly urge the Governor to use the funds allocated by the General Assembly for critical health care programs.

Although every Maryland agency saw cuts, the legislature made sure that money is available so that health care initiatives don't have to be slashed as much as we had feared. Since the General Assembly has allocated money to fully fund programs for pregnant women and family planning and restore some funds for doctor reimbursements and critical mental health programs, the ball is now in the Governor's court. If the Governor does not fund these programs, thousands of pregnant women could lose critically needed health care coverage and everyone dependent on Medicaid for health care will be hurt because doctors won't be adequately reimbursed.

The reason these programs still have hope is because of the great work of the House Appropriations Committee, led by Chair Maggie McIntosh; the Health and Human Resources Subcommittee, which is chaired by Craig Zucker; and the Senate Budget and Tax Committee, which is led by its Chairman Ed Kasemeyer and its Vice Chair, Rich Madaleno.

The legislative session also coincides with the final weeks of this year's open enrollment period to get coverage through Maryland Health Connection. Having overcome its early technical problems, Maryland's Affordable Care Act enrollment program has been amazingly successful. To date, more than 300,000 Marylanders signed up for coverage during the second enrollment period. More Marylanders are taking advantage of a special additional enrollment period through April 30th to get covered and avoid tax penalties. We are proud to be working with partners around the state to educate consumers about the quality, affordable options as well as the financial help available to them.

Part of this success is due to our radio ad featuring Orioles star, Adam Jones, which helped to significantly increase enrollment. But we know there are still many more people to reach. Focus groups conducted late last year show that public awareness about the insurance marketplace and health reform is still very limited. That is why it is critical to protect the marketing budget of the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange so they can continue to get the word out about the life-changing and life-saving options available on the marketplace, Maryland Health Connection.

Maryland also led the charge to ensure federal renewal of CHIP so kids can continue getting the care they need to grow up healthy and successful. Governor Hogan wrote a helpful letter to Congress urging them to deliver on their promises to kids and, with every member of the Maryland Congressional delegation voting in favor of funding renewal, it passed overwhelmingly through Congress and is now on its way to President Obama for his signature.

Despite the great strides we've made, more work still needs to be done. We will continue to work with the Maryland Health Benefit Exchange to make sure that every Marylander who is eligible for health care under the Affordable Care Act is enrolled. And, we will continue to work with the more than 750 faith, community, labor, business and health care groups in our Healthy Maryland Initiative to advocate for an additional dollar-per-pack increase in the state tobacco tax. This public health revenue measure would save kids' lives from tobacco addiction and would fund critical health care and public-health needs.

Like maintaining one's own health, keeping Maryland's health care system working well requires frequent check-ups and consistent habits. We can all be proud of the progress we continue to make. But, Governor Hogan now must decide whether this progress can continue or whether he will put at risk critically needed health care coverage for thousands of Marylanders.

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About MedChi

MedChi, The Maryland State Medical Society, is a non-profit membership association of Maryland physicians. It is the largest physician organization in Maryland. The mission of MedChi is to serve as Maryland's foremost advocate and resource for physicians, their patients and the public health of Maryland. For more information, please visit www.medchi.org.

About Health Care for All!

The Health Care for All! Coalition is a broad-based coalition of over 1200 faith, labor, business and community groups that have been working to guarantee all Marylanders access to quality, affordable health care. To learn more, visit <http://www.healthcareforall.com>.