

As many Americans know, one of the key features of the 2010 Affordable Care Act (“ACA”) was to expand the Medicaid program to cover all adults with income below 138% of the federal poverty level in states willing to engage in such “expansion” with the support of federal dollars. Since the implementation of the ACA, many states opted out of the Medicaid Expansion opportunities that were one component of the ACA. This was especially common in more conservative states, such as Missouri. To date, 37 states (including D.C.) have adopted Medicaid Expansion and 14 states have not.¹ Voice of the Poor (“VOP”) believes that the time is right for Missouri to follow other conservative states who have recently passed Medicaid expansion bills such as Nebraska, Utah and Idaho. VOP plans to urge Missouri legislators and other elected officials to proceed in a way that preserves and ultimately broadens health care access for the underserved, including through support of Medicaid Expansion.

Inspired by the “Corporal Works of Mercy,” the Catholic faith seeks to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, and shelter the homeless. In line with these values, it is our fervent hope that a properly constructed expansion of Missouri’s Medicaid program will allow lower income families to use what little they have on other basic necessities, rather than on expensive health care. Simply put, it is our belief that increasing access to Medicaid for families may be one way to reduce poverty.

As many Vincentians know, 12.3% of all American currently live below the Federal Poverty Line (“FPL”). The FPL ranges from \$12,140 for a family of one to \$25,100 for a family of four. Nationally, approximately 1 in 5 children live in families at or below the FPL. Locally in St. Louis, 39.4% of children live in poverty. It is estimated that it should cost approximately \$58,000 for a single parent to provide basic needs for themselves and two children. While so many families struggle to make ends meet, and while St. Vincent DePaul Society seeks to serve that community in many ways, VOP seeks to find creative ways to advocate for the poor.

Research conducted in 2017 by the Russell Sage and Robert Johnson Foundations (Project HOPE) demonstrates that Medicaid helps pull families out of poverty by providing access to affordable health coverage and lowering out-of-pocket costs.² The study found that Medicaid is among the most effective antipoverty programs. The study also revealed that Medicaid had a larger effect on child poverty than all non-health means-tested benefits combined. In fact, it is estimated that access to Medicaid reduces child poverty by 5.3 percentage points across the United States. Medicaid is particularly important for people of color. Access to Medicaid reduced the poverty rates of Hispanics by 6.1 percentage points and African Americans by 4.9 percentage points.

Because of the dramatic effect that access to Medicaid coverage has been shown to have on overall poverty levels, VOP is advocating for a change in policy so that Missouri’s low-income families --- many of whom are hard-working people in low-wage jobs --- have the same opportunities for affordable housing and education as those in affluent communities. We want to help Missouri families help themselves!

Medicaid expansion has received support from the Church at large. In fact, the official stated position of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops affirms that “health care is a basic right flowing from the sanctity and dignity of human life.” In a 2009 letter to the U.S. Senate, the U.S. Bishops expressed their support for Medicaid expansion for people living at 133 percent or lower

of the federal poverty level.³ Consistent with the position of the U.S. Bishops, we are confident that we can find ways to advocate for Medicaid expansion in ways that align with the Catholic faith.

We are also confident that Medicaid expansion can be accomplished in a way that makes a broad array of Missourians comfortable despite other political differences. In fact, several traditionally conservative states have opted into Medicaid expansion, likely due in part to the support of the faith-based communities. For example, although Utah is typically a fiscally conservative state, the religious community has been the driving force behind legislative compromises which have led to a limited Medicaid expansion that many conservatives agree will benefit the poor without breaking the bank. Arizona is another example of a fiscally conservative state, whose Republican governor has signed on to Medicaid expansion. These are but a few examples of instances in which conservative leaders and faith-based communities have worked together to fashion a Medicaid expansion package that works for everyone.

We are committed to keeping Vincentians informed about our efforts and will be providing further details about how you can help with this advocacy. For now, simply understanding the critical need for Medicaid expansion and engaging in a robust dialogue about this issue within our community will help move this initiative forward.

¹ Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Status of State Medicaid Expansion Decisions. Published April 9, 2019. Available at <https://www.kff.org/medicaid/issue-brief/status-of-state-medicaid-expansion-decisions-interactive-map/>.

² Dahlia K. Remler, Sanders D. Korenman, and Rosemary T. Hyson. HEALTH AFFAIRS VOL. 36, NO. 10. EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS, BEHAVIORAL HEALTH & MORE. Estimating the Effects of Health Insurance and Other Social Programs on Poverty Under The Affordable Care Act. Available at: <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2017.0331>.

³ Letter to United States Senate. Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, Office of Domestic Social Development. Access to Health Care (Medicaid Expansion). February 2013. Available at <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/upload/2013-02-Health-Care-background.pdf>