



ACS CAN & Health Care Reform

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), the advocacy affiliate of the American Cancer Society, is the nation's leading cancer advocacy organization working every day to make cancer issues a national priority. ACS CAN empowers regular people to be part of the growing national movement that is fighting back against cancer. We are focused on the needs of patients and ensuring that people have access to the care they need to prevent, detect and fight cancer and to maximize the quality of their lives.

For the last three years, the American Cancer Society and ACS CAN have helped to shape and lead the nationwide conversation about the critical role that access to quality health care for everyone plays in our effort to defeat cancer.

In the arena of Access to Care, and specifically Health Care Reform, the stakes are high. Securing access to quality health care for everyone will have tremendous impact in reducing the incidence and mortality of cancer. It will save lives. It will also improve the quality of life for millions of people.

Background

In 2006, the American Cancer Society's National Board of Directors directed the organization to implement strategies for expanding access to care as a key effort to achieve the Society's 2015 goals. The Society's goals include cutting the number of people dying from cancer in half, reducing the occurrence of cancer by 25% and improving the quality of life of all those affected by the disease.

The American Cancer Society and ACS CAN's interest in this issue stems from our mission. We cannot win the fight against cancer if we do not ensure that people facing cancer have access to the life-saving prevention, early detection and treatment that they need. With such tremendous advances occurring every year in the laboratory with regard to understanding cancer, its causes and its progression, we must do more to make sure that people have access to the results of that progress.

The first phase of the Society's nationwide Access to Care initiative focused on the following question: What is meaningful health insurance from a cancer perspective? Through its deliberative policymaking process, the Society answered that question with its "four As" for meaningful health insurance: adequacy, affordability, availability, and administrative simplicity. Within these principles the Society has focused most extensively on the topic of adequacy. Through research, public communications and advocacy – the Society and ACS CAN have made the case that in order for health insurance coverage to be meaningful it must be adequate in ensuring that patients have access to what they need.

Beyond a focus on the critical issue of coverage, the Society and ACS CAN are also focused on other key pieces of comprehensive reform critical to our mission. The current health care delivery system is strongly focused on treating conditions such as cancer, but requires a system that places much more emphasis on wellness and disease prevention to improve health and to begin to control costs. In addition, more needs to be done post-diagnosis, by emphasizing the importance of quality, evidence-based care from diagnosis through the end of life, including better chronic care management and the expansion of palliative care. All of these principles, along with accompanying public policy tools, serve as the basis for assessing legislative proposals for health care reform.

Together ACS and ACS CAN have waged a multi-faceted Access to Care campaign to encourage their own staff, volunteers, and the public at large to learn about the importance of access to health care, speak out about their experiences in the health care system, and take action to advance change in health care. By looking at the health care problem through the “cancer lens,” the Society and ACS CAN succeeded in elevating the nationwide debate about the need for health care reform, and in placing particular emphasis on the problems of the underinsured – those with inadequate health care coverage who are often overlooked in the health care debate.

In September 2007, the Society and ACS CAN launched a nationwide public education campaign and achieved significant national and regional media exposure. We have also partnered with others across the continuum of stakeholders in the health care system to do joint advertising in August of 2008 and again in January 2009 aimed at propelling the national conversation forward toward reform.

Other key elements of this initiative have included published, peer-reviewed scientific findings about the direct correlation between lack of insurance coverage and poorer cancer outcomes, as well as a compilation and use of the stories derived from approximately 20,000 constituents who contacted the National Cancer Information Center (NCIC) and interacted with its Health Insurance Assistance Service (HIAS) team.

Moving Forward

All of this work has succeeded in securing a “seat at the table” for ACS CAN as the hard work of developing legislative proposals to bring about comprehensive health care reform moves into high gear. As the leading (and often only) voice of patients to be at the table for these discussions, ACS CAN is making sure that health care reform meets the needs of patients, their caregivers and families. We are making the case for adequacy of coverage and the importance of prevention in the halls of Congress and state Capitols, in stakeholder meetings and with the new Presidential Administration. In this effort, we are guided by the sound science, evidence-based analysis and deliberative policy-making process that provide the framework for all of our advocacy efforts.

In the next phase of work, ACS CAN will seek to leverage its unique resources to advance health care legislation that meets the Society’s principles and the needs of patients. ACS CAN has a nationwide network of trained grassroots volunteers which will lobby elected officials to achieve this goal. ACS CAN will focus its efforts to ensure adequate, affordable coverage for all Americans and to transform health care to emphasize wellness and deliver prevention.