

Minnesota-Based community, labor and faith-based organizations join together to fight for health equity

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Racially disparate health outcomes are a national crisis according to members of ISALAH, SEIU Minnesota State Council, and TakeAction Minnesota who announced the Minnesota launch of a national effort calling for solutions to systemic racial disparities in health care.

The HealthCare Equality Project (HEP) kicked off their national campaign in Washington, D.C. last week with an event joining congressional members together with community members fighting for racial justice in health reform. The Minnesota launch is one of nine state-based efforts nationwide.

Although issues surrounding the 47 million uninsured, and countless more underinsured, has been widely reported on, the health care crisis goes much deeper for Americans representing racial and ethnic minorities. African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian and Pacific Islanders have endured systemic healthcare inequalities that have resulted in greater suffering from chronic diseases, shorter life spans and an overall diminished quality of life. Even among the insured, glaring disparities exist between these communities and their white counterparts in terms of access to, and quality of, health care.

The Rev. Willie G. McAfee, pastor of Nu Way Missionary Baptist Church in St. Cloud and ISALAH leader said that "In Minnesota, ISALAH has been working to get our legislators and congressional members to take specific action to create affordable health care for ALL people. It is part of the larger fight to improve health outcomes in communities of color."

Minneapolis-based Somali Action Alliance has been working with TakeAction Minnesota to educate its new immigrant community on the issues that define their daily lives -- health care chief among them. "The Somali-American community is acutely aware of the need to improve access to health care, including breaking down language and cultural barriers that so often prevent our people from getting the care they really need," said its Executive Director, Hashi Shafi. "Somalis in Minnesota are energized by President Obama's commitment to real reform, and to his leadership toward erasing the disparities that have resulted in unequal health care for people of color in this country."

The organizations also discussed the importance of state-based health care reform efforts in the context of passing comprehensive federal reform that incorporates the needs of unique populations in the various states. Congress is working this week to pass the President's budget, which includes an unprecedented \$634 billion down-payment on health care reform. The national Health Care for America Now! (HCAN) campaign has been actively coordinating with the Minnesota organizations to pass the budget and the organizations argue that federal health care reform make reform efforts here in Minnesota more – not less – important.

"President Obama has committed \$634 billion to reforming health care and doing it in 2009. This historic leadership provides us with a crucial opportunity to address the vast racial and ethnic disparities in health care," said Javier Morillo, President of SEIU Local 26 and Vice President of the SEIU Minnesota State Council. "We must ensure that health care reform is more than everyone having an insurance card. It has to be coupled with access and quality care in order to right the injustices of health care inequities. We need health care that works for everyone."

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The Healthcare Equality Project's unprecedented platform will mobilize and nationally coordinate state-based efforts to include health care equity in the national reform movement now vigorously underway in Washington.

National coalition partners include SEIU, Gamaliel, LULAC, Northwest Federation of Community Organizations, ACORN, La Clínica del Pueblo, Center for Community Change, URU the Right to Be, Partnership to Fight Chronic Diseases, National Hispanic Medical Association, National Puerto Rican Coalition, Hispanic Federation, and Latinos for National Health Insurance.