



Health care reform must include us, too

Our community cannot be left behind as this massive domestic priority advances

By Heather R. Mizeur

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For more than 10 years, Republican congressional leadership buried our community's priorities under a stack of hostile legislation and constitutional amendments. Ten months into the Obama era, we are ready and eager for progress – on ENDA, hate crimes protections, a repeal of “Don't Ask, Don't Tell,” and a counterattack on the inaptly named Defense of Marriage Act.

But with Congress busy taking advantage of a unique opportunity for systemic health care reform, our anticipation – and weariness – continues to grow. Have we been sidelined yet again? Where we once faced down a Republican Party intent on making us second-class citizens, must we now be content playing second fiddle?

Let me be clear: I'm not suggesting that all of my LGBT sisters and brothers should sit tight and wait our turn while health care reform sucks all the oxygen out of the fall agenda on Capitol Hill. There has never been a better time to advocate for our rights.

Nor am I suggesting that the health reform legislation itself will offer solutions to all of the many health challenges faced by LGBT Americans. Not a chance.

That said, we should recognize that our community stands to gain when Democrats finally succeed in pushing through health care reform and there is much we can do to assure that our LGBT health priorities are baked into the deal.

Legislation pending in the House includes items specific to our community's health. One provision would allow states to provide life-saving drugs to those with HIV before they develop AIDS. Another would end the inequitable tax treatment of health benefits for employees' same-sex spouses and domestic partners. Still another would improve information collection on health disparities that affect the LGBT community. These proposals are welcome additions to the larger bill, and we must unite our efforts to ensure their inclusion in the final package.

Our work begins in the Senate where even these LGBT stepping-stones are absent in that chamber's pending bills. But we should also be concerned that numerous other possible measures are not even in the mix yet – like mandating that insurance companies offer coverage of health services for their transgender enrollees or focusing preventive measures on our community's unique needs (such as the high incidence of breast cancer for non-birthing lesbians).

And despite our interest in LGBT-specific priorities in health reform, let us not forget that health reform writ large will help our community by raising the bar for all Americans. If expensive, inadequate or unavailable insurance is a fact of life for many Americans, it is a disaster for the LGBT community.

Given continued employment discrimination (especially against transgender workers) and the relative scarcity of domestic partner coverage, LGBT people are disproportionately represented among the ranks of those without employer-sponsored health coverage. And once we begin searching for individual coverage, we are more likely to be refused a policy because of pre-existing conditions.

Because each of these twin indignities disproportionately affects LGBT consumers, their elimination would strengthen our hand even more than those of other Americans. Requiring insurance companies to issue policies regardless of medical history would ensure that all are able to access coverage – including those with HIV/AIDS, those with a history of mental health concerns and transgender consumers who have sought treatment for transsexualism.

We are eager in the Obama era to accumulate as many legislative and policy victories as quickly as we can. Our time has come to erase the errors of DOMA and “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Our time has come to put our allies on record advancing ENDA and hate crimes protections. But it is time for our community to make health care reform an LGBT priority, too.

We understandably have grown weary from decades of neglect. Our bill of indictment and list of remedies is long. All of our legislative requests are important and overdue. A crowded, urgent agenda is tough to prioritize, let alone make room for new asks.

But the moment demands that we focus our immediate energies on assuring that our community is not once again left behind as this massive domestic priority is moved forward. Health reform must address the needs of LGBT Americans and it will only happen if we organize now.

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