

Legislative Impact Newsletter

August, 2007

***notification:** The newsletter for August is late and in a different form due to the fact that the dsl system at OCC's offices has been disconnected to facilitate the transfer of the office equipment to another office location. Hopefully we will be back on time with the September edition. Thanks for understanding.

POVERTY IN OKLAHOMA

LOW WAGES / HEALTH INSURANCE

Yet Hope Looms on the Horizon

“We stand in the midst of nourishment and we starve. We dwell in the land of plenty,
yet

we persist in going hungry. Not only do we dwell in the land of plenty; we have the
capacity

to be filled with the utter fullness of God (Eph. 3:16 – 19). In the light of such
possibility,

what happens? ... Why do we drag our hearts? Lock up our souls? Why do we limp?

Why do we straddle the issues? “
Wiederkehr)

(*A Tree Full of Angels*, Macrina

U.S. Poverty Decreases – Oklahoma Poverty Increases.

“The poor you will have with you always” was not meant to be an excuse. New U.S. Census Bureau information released today, August 29th, reveals that the percent of Oklahomans living in poverty increased while figures for the rest of the nation decreased. Although the national increase was modest, an 0.7% increase in median household income and a 0.3% decrease in poverty, one must question what has caused Oklahoma’s poverty rate to continue to soar.

Facts: The annual “Poverty Day” data, released by the Census Bureau, reveals that over the period of 2005 – 2006, an average of 15.4% of Oklahomans lived below the federal poverty level. This is sharply up from 13.2% in 2004 – ’05 and 11.8% in 2003 – ’04. Oklahoma’s most recent poverty rate is at a ten-year peak with an average of 537,000 Oklahomans living in poverty the past two years.

County-level data reveals that Oklahoma County is suffering the worst concentration of poverty of all the state’s metropolitan counties, with 22.1% of the county’s residents falling below the poverty line in 2006. Median household incomes in OK in ’06 was \$38,276, which is #10,175, or 21%, below the national median household income.

Two conditions strongly complicate poverty in our state: the **low minimum wage** and the **high cost of health insurance**.

“No business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country. By living wages I mean more than a bare subsistence level – I mean the wages of decent living.” (Franklin D. Roosevelt)

It is not possible to rise out of poverty while working full-time and earning little over \$10,000. a year, before taxes. Most of us reading this newsletter cannot imagine sustaining ourselves, much less our families, on such a wage.

PEOPLE OF FAITH FOR FAIR WAGES, a justice project of the Kansas / Oklahoma Conference, United Church of Christ, has launched a fair wage campaign in Oklahoma. Led by the organization’s Justice and Witness Organizer, the group has identified the importance of working statewide and exploring alternative solutions to the low-wage / poverty problem. In an effort to educate

and mobilize people of faith and allies statewide, the UCC Justice and Witness Organizer will coordinate and lead six educational forums in smaller cities and rural areas of the state. These forums will focus on poverty, low wages and, particularly, the low wages of school support workers.

The forums will take place between August , 2007 and January, 2008 - in churches whenever possible.

The forums will be designed to educate people of faith about the connection between faith and fair wages and to empower low-wage workers across the state. People of faith will gain insight into the moral logic that merges personal and social responsibility and better understand the social systems that trap people in poverty.

People of faith will be given tools to engage each other and members of the wider community in a new dialogue about the common good and the importance of a new bottom line that lifts up the quality of life as being more important than maximizing profits.

- 21 For more information on dates and places of these forums, contact your local UCC office.

INSURANCE COVERAGE IN OKLAHOMA – MAYBE HELP IS ON THE WAY

Insurance Commissioner Kim Holland today (Wed, Aug. 29th) announced the launch of a statewide series of community meetings to seek citizens' opinions about what services should be covered under a core or basic health benefit plan.

"This groundbreaking initiative was first discussed at last year's Summit on the High Cost of Health Insurance and led the Oklahoma Legislature to establish the Core Health Benefit Task Force," said Holland. "All Oklahomans should have access to an affordable health insurance plan."

The series of community meetings, called OK CHAT, began in southwestern Oklahoma last week and will continue through October in other areas of the state.

HCR1010, co-authored by Rep. Ron Peterson and Sen. Susan Paddock, empowers the Task Force to make recommendations to the legislature for the creation of a lower cost, basic health insurance plan. The resolution also requires the Oklahoma Insurance Department to provide the Task Force with the resources and information necessary to develop their recommendations.

Through a computerized tool called Choosing Healthplans All Together (CHAT), the Insurance Department will gather information about what citizens believe is most important when building a basic health insurance plan.

Choices Made by Southwestern Oklahomans include:

- 22 Overall, communities opted for a lower premium but with higher co-payments;
- 23 Hospital Choice was a priority over other services, especially in rural areas;
- 24 Every community identified Prevention as a necessary priority;
- 25 4 out of 5 communities chose dental coverage in a core plan;
- 26 Each community believed some mental and behavioral coverage was necessary in a core plan.

More than 40 OK CHAT sessions will be offered in 31 communities across the state beginning Aug. 21. Information gathered from all sessions will be compiled and will form the basis of a report to the Core Health Benefit Task Force. In addition to these sessions, Commissioner Holland will host six regional Town Hall meetings to present communities' coverage priorities and to provide a forum for discussion of Oklahoma health care issues.

For more information, contact OK Insurance Dep't. (OKC) at: 1 (800)522-0071 or (405) 521-2828; (Tulsa) call 1(800)728-2906 or 1(918)747-7720.

FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY - ALLEVIATION OF POVERTY - EXPANSION OF ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

CAP (Community Action Project) has been working over the past several months on a process intended to spin off their public policy department into a new standalone state policy organization. The new organization will assume CAP's existing role of staffing the Alliance for Oklahoma's Future and conducting the major policy analyses on state budget and tax issues. The formation of this group has been successfully completed and an initial Board meeting was held Friday, Aug. 24, in OKC.

The new organization will be a pivotal tool in creating the capacity to conduct sustained and effective work in favor of policies promoting fiscal responsibility, alleviating poverty and expanding *economic opportunity for Oklahoma's people.*

Anyone with questions about the new organization or what these changes may mean for

the Alliance, please contact David Blatt at dblatt@captc.org or publicpolicy@captc.org

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