



Catholic Committee of Appalachia  
STATEMENT ON  
AMERICAN HEALTH CARE ACT  
LEGISLATION

June 23, 2017

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia (CCA) opposes congressional efforts to dismantle the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and implement the American Health Care Act (AHCA). Analyses of the AHCA have consistently predicted that its effects will be detrimental to public health, with an estimated 23 million across the nation losing access to health coverage over the next decade if the law is implemented. That loss will result from Medicaid cuts, as well as from policy premium increases which will make health care economically unattainable for struggling individuals and families. These effects will be devastatingly felt in our struggling Appalachian communities. Meanwhile, wealthy individuals and industries will benefit from billions of dollars in tax breaks included in the legislation. The bill stands in stark contrast to the preferential option for the poor, a pillar of Catholic social teaching which obligates us to consider the needs of the marginalized over the powerful, the sick over the well.

The AHCA, as described above, does not live up to the clear teaching of the Catholic Church with regard to health care which is rooted in the conviction that health care is a human right not to be denied to any person regardless of economic status.<sup>1</sup> The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has consistently echoed this teaching, most recently in their recent “Letter to the Senate on Health Care Reform” which encourages lawmakers to approach that reform “with the principle that health care is not a privilege, but a right in keeping with the life and dignity of every person.”<sup>2</sup> Of specific concern to the USCCB are proposed cuts to Medicaid funding. Funding cuts and Medicaid expansion rollback would adversely affect struggling persons, ignoring the bishops’ imperative that health care be “truly affordable” to persons of all economic backgrounds.

Our own Appalachian bishops have spoken on this issue as well. In *A Church That Heals: A Pastoral Letter on Health and Well-Being in West Virginia*, Bishop Michael Bransfield of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston addresses our responsibility to the marginalized in matters of health policy, urging us to “look beyond the easy path of balancing budgets and cutting costs at the expense of the poor and the most vulnerable.” He also expresses concern that “[w]e have seen an erosion of the life and vigor of Christ’s mission of healing” in our modern age, and reminds the faithful that Christ instructed us in Luke’s gospel to extend our banquet invitation to “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind,” to

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, no. 11; Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, no. 19; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2211, 2288; *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 166;

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/health-care/letter-to-senate-on-health-care-reform-2017-06-01.cfm>.

those who cannot repay—not to the rich and powerful.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Lexington Bishop John Stowe rejected recent attempts to cut Medicaid coverage in Kentucky, stating “Having no health insurance, or inadequate basic coverage, means premature death. [...] All people, regardless of their circumstances, should have access to comprehensive, quality and affordable health care.”<sup>4</sup> Finally, in a statement about the proposed AHCA, Bishop Bransfield said,

For a believer, central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects “the least of these” (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, vulnerable and at risk, without work or in poverty should come first. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times. Pope Francis reminds us that “Each individual Christian and every community is called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor, and for enabling them to be fully a part of society.” [...] In order for our poorer and more vulnerable citizens “to be fully a part of society,” we must ensure their health. I call upon our legislators to care for the well-being of all our citizens.<sup>5</sup>

The Catholic Committee of Appalachia believes that the AHCA is a manifestation of that erosion of Christ’s healing mission in today’s often profit-driven society, in that it deprives our most vulnerable brothers and sisters of their seat at the banquet where resources for healing abound but are marked instead for the financial gain of the powerful. We implore legislators to reject this legislation, and also call on members of the church (clergy, religious, and lay persons) to speak out prophetically in opposition to it. Finally, we reiterate our long-held commitment to work for universal health care for all, especially for those our society deems undeserving, joining Pope Francis who says, “Health is not a consumer good but a universal right, so access to health services cannot be a privilege.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Bishop Bransfield’s pastoral letter can be found at <http://www.dwc.org/a-church-that-heals.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Rev. John Stowe, “Reject Medicaid Changes That Will Deny Care,” *Lexington Herald-Leader* (July 28, 2016), available at <http://www.kentucky.com/opinion/op-ed/article92476897.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.dwc.org/latestnews/2645-bishop-bransfield-calls-on-legislators-to-care-for-the-well-being-of-all-citizens.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See CCA’s 1999 “Resolution on Universal Health Care” which reads, “[T]he Catholic Committee of Appalachia promotes and calls for universal health care [and we] invite all Catholic dioceses and their people to do the same” (<http://ccappal.org/publications/statements-resolutions/resolution-on-universal-health-care>) and our 2015 pastoral letter *The Telling Takes Us Home* which states, “We call for laws which... defend the dignity of the human person by instituting a living wage, the universal right to health care, and the right of workers to organize” ([http://ccappal.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PeoplesPastoral\\_final\\_forweb.pdf](http://ccappal.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/PeoplesPastoral_final_forweb.pdf)). For Pope Francis, see <http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/health-care-is-not-a-business-but-a-service-to-life-pope-says.cfm>.