



Georgia collaborative awarded grant to study, promote indigent and charity care policies at Atlanta hospitals

ATLANTA – A collaborative of advocates in Georgia received a grant today from Community Catalyst to improve access to health care for the underinsured and uninsured, and reduce medical debt and aggressive collections practices.

The Metropolitan Atlanta Hospital Accountability Project is led by Georgia Watch, the state's only consumer watchdog group. Project partners include the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, Concerned Black Clergy, Georgia Legal Services Program, Atlanta Legal Aid Society and WonderRoot.

“Expanding access to health care and access to insurance are challenges that our state leaders have been grappling with for years, with mixed results,” said Georgia Watch Executive Director Allison Wall. **“This is the right time and the right collaborative of public interest organizations to make a positive difference in these issues and in the lives of Georgians.”**

Since 2006, Georgia Watch has conducted detailed financial research and analysis of several of the state's tax-exempt nonprofit hospitals in an ongoing series of reports titled “A Crisis of Affordable Care.” In its research, Georgia Watch has found that most Georgia hospitals charge uninsured, underinsured and self-pay patients a higher cost for services than the average amount charged to third party payers, such as private insurance. Approximately 18 percent of Georgia residents are currently uninsured; the number of Georgia's underinsured is unknown.

Some nonprofit hospitals also fail to inform eligible patients of available subsidized care and community benefit programs, leaving many scrambling to pay medical debt that may have been reduced through state and federal programs.

“Hospital practices, such as overcharging and aggressive collections, impact not only a patient's access to care, but also the community as a whole,” said Wall. **“Approximately half of all Americans who file for bankruptcy do so because of medical bills, and three-quarters of those patients had health insurance at the time of illness or injury.”**

Of the 100 counties in the nation with the highest rates of bankruptcy in 2006, 45 were in Georgia. An estimated 25 million insured people nationally are not protected from high medical expenses, according to a recent report from the Commonwealth Fund, a 60

percent increase from 2003 to 2007. Middle-income families experienced the biggest growth, with the number of underinsured nearly tripling over that same four-year period.

The grant program, an initiative of Community Catalyst's Hospital Accountability Project, promotes changes in policies and practices of individual hospitals and hospital systems, and works for reform at local and state levels.

“We’re pleased to support Georgia Watch and its project partners as they work to create a more transparent, accountable and fair health care system for everyone,” said Renée Markus Hodin, project director at Community Catalyst. **“In spite of paying ever-rising premiums and co-payments, too many Americans are shocked to learn that their insurance fails them when they need it most. While we work to eliminate the causes of underinsurance, we must also provide a safety net that protects people from financial ruin and gives them access to timely medical services.”**

This grant is part of a project funded by the settlement of a class action lawsuit against the Tenet Healthcare Corporation, a national for-profit hospital company. Advocacy groups in Arkansas, California, Florida, Indiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee and Texas also received similar grants in 2008.

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*Founded in 2002, **Georgia Watch** is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501-(c)(3) watchdog group focusing on consumer education and research in the areas of health care, insurance, identity theft and personal finance. Georgia Watch reports are available online at www.GeorgiaWatch.org.*

***Community Catalyst** is a national nonprofit advocacy organization dedicated to making quality, affordable health care accessible to everyone. Since 1997, Community Catalyst has worked to build consumer and community leadership to transform the American health system. With the belief that this transformation will happen when consumers are fully engaged and have an organized voice, Community Catalyst works in partnership with national, state and local consumer organizations, policymakers and foundations, providing leadership and support to change the health care system so it serves everyone—especially vulnerable members of society. For more information, visit www.communitycatalyst.org.*