



## **BLUE CROSS BLUE SHIELD OF MASSACHUSETTS FOUNDATION TESTIFIES ON HEALTH CARE DISPARITIES BEFORE JOINT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC HEALTH**

***Foundation research finds health care disparities on the basis of race, income, and geographic location; grantmaking work focuses on provider-, systems-, and community-based solutions***

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June 9, 2009 — Today the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation testified before the Joint Committee on Public Health to share what the Foundation has learned about health care disparities from its grantmaking and policy research.

Jarrett T. Barrios, President of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, shared research commissioned by the Foundation that measured health care disparities on the basis of income, region, and race:

- The state's rate of uninsurance is down to 2.6% overall, but the rate of uninsurance in households with incomes of less than 150% is 5.8%, nearly 30 times higher than those with incomes of 500% and more of the federal poverty level (.2%);
- 24% of those on public health insurance plans had trouble finding a primary care provider that would accept their insurance, compared with 7% on private plans;
- Residents in Western and Southeastern Massachusetts are more likely than residents elsewhere in the state to report difficulties finding a provider who takes their insurance and they are less likely to report having a usual source of care;
- Only 77% of Hispanics report having had a doctor's visit in the last year compared with 84% of white residents;
- Only 66% of Black residents report dental care in the last year compared with 76% of white residents.

Miriam Messinger, Associate Director of Grantmaking and Evaluation for the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation, shared lessons learned from the Foundation's Closing the Gap on Health Care Disparities program area.

A program focused on reducing the rates of cardiovascular disease in Latino patients at the Holyoke Health Center saw some successes by implementing the following changes:

- Conducting nutrition and exercise classes in Spanish;
- Hiring bicultural and bilingual staff;
- Incorporating smoking cessation efforts into every visit at the Center.

An Alliance for Inclusion and Prevention program focused on improving the mental health of Dorchester-based students impacted by violence-related trauma measured the following improvements:

- School-based services lead to greatly enhanced communication between providers and teachers and providers and family;
- On-site services greatly reduced the numbers of missed appointments;
- Fee-for-service paid for all but \$4,000 of a mental health provider's full-time salary.

Messinger also shared promising strategies in eliminating health care disparities from lessons learned by the Foundation's nine grantees of the three-year Closing the Gap on Health Care Disparities program area:

- **Community voice** in defining problems and creating solutions.
  - **Coalition building** to bring together key stakeholders from community agencies, government, and local businesses.
  - **Focus on system and provider changes** more than individual behavior modifications.
  - **Adopt a learning approach** in the working across silos and including frequent feedback and evaluation.
  - **Community education** about disparities and root causes is critical to building public support for the resources necessary to implement successful change.
  - **Utilize a social determinants approach**—if we do not begin to look upstream and ensure that all our residents live in healthy and vibrant communities then our best programs will always be full
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The testimony can be read in full at [BlueCrossFoundation.org](http://BlueCrossFoundation.org).

**More information about the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation**The mission of the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation is to expand access to health care. Through grants and policy initiatives, the Foundation works with public and private organizations to broaden health coverage and reduce barriers to care. It focuses on developing measurable and sustainable solutions that benefit uninsured, vulnerable and low-income individuals and families in the Commonwealth, and served as a catalyst for the pioneering Massachusetts health care reform law passed in 2006. The Foundation was founded in 2001 with an initial endowment of \$55 million from Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts. The Foundation operates separately from the company and is governed by its own 18-member Board of Directors. It is one of the largest private health philanthropies in New England and in 2007 was awarded the Paul Ylvisaker Award for Public Policy Engagement by the Council on Foundations.

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