

## POLICY & PRACTICE

### Bill Promotes Phys. Ed.

A measure proposed by Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) would require school districts and state education agencies to report to parents on the quantity and quality of physical education provided. The Fitness Integrated With Teaching Kids (FIT Kids) Act (S. 2173) also would require school counseling programs to take into account students' emotional and physical well-being; support professional development for health and physical education teachers; and authorize the Institute of Medicine to report on how physical activity can be included in all aspects of the school day. "As every parent knows, engaging children in physical activity throughout the day improves fitness, burns off excess energy, and boosts concentration in the classroom. I hope this bill will empower our schools and parents to help improve our kids' health," Sen. Harkin said in a statement.

### One-Third of Americans Uninsured

Almost 35% of Americans uninsured had no health care coverage for at least part of 2006-2007, up from 30% in 1999-2000, Families USA reported. Of these, 19% were uninsured for longer than 1 year; more than half were uninsured for longer than 6 months. Of the 89.6 million people who lacked coverage, 71% had full-time jobs and another 9% were working part time; only 17% were unemployed. The numbers are substantially larger than those published by the U.S. Census Bureau (which cites 47 million uninsured in 2006, or 16%), because those statistics include only those who were uninsured for a full year. The report is at [www.familiesusa.org](http://www.familiesusa.org).

### Disordered Eating in Overweight Teens

Factors such as teasing by family, personal weight concerns, and dieting/unhealthy weight-control behaviors are strong and consistent predictors of overweight status, binge eating, and extreme weight-control behaviors later in adolescence, a study in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine found. About 40% of overweight girls and 20% of overweight boys in the study engaged in either binge eating, extreme weight control, or both. The findings "suggest a need for decreasing weight-related pressures within an adolescent's social environment, decreasing weight concerns, and decreasing unhealthy weight control practices while promoting healthier alternatives," the study's authors concluded.

### Medicaid Enrollment Declines

Enrollment in Medicaid declined in 2007 for the first time in nearly a decade, primarily because new documentation requirements have caused significant delays in processing applications and because of the strong economy and lower unemployment, according to a new 50-state survey from the Kaiser Family Foundation. But states expect enrollment and spending to increase in 2008 as they move forward with program enhancements, according to the survey. "States are turning to Medicaid to address the rising number of uninsured to help fill in the gaps for low-income families," Diane Rowland, executive vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation, said in a statement.

### Push for Medicare E-Prescribing

A coalition of 22 health, business, and consumer organizations has asked Congress to pass legislation requiring physicians who see Medicare patients to adopt electronic prescribing by the year 2010. "Last year, the Institute of Medicine estimated that preventable medication errors harm an estimated 1.5 million Americans each year," said a letter from the coalition, which includes Aetna, Consumers Union, the Corporate Health Care Coalition, the Pacific Business Group on Health, and the Pharmaceutical Care Management Association, to leaders of the Senate Finance Committee, House Ways & Means Committee, and House Energy and Commerce Committee. "In the report, the IOM called on all physicians to adopt electronic prescribing (e-prescribing) by 2010 to address this problem. Unfortunately, fewer than 1 in 10 physicians are meeting this challenge. As a result, neither patients nor physicians take advantage of critical, available, real-time information that would improve outcomes, save lives, and dramatically reduce health care costs. To address this problem, we urge Congress to approve legislation this year calling for full physician adoption of e-prescribing in Medicare."

### Wal-Mart Expands \$4 Generics

Wal-Mart has added 24 medications to its growing list of generic prescription drug products that patients can receive for \$4 for a 30-day supply. The prescriptions can be filled at 4,005 Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, and Neighborhood Market pharmacies in the United States. Among the 24 new medications are levobunolol, carvedilol, warfarin, and nitroglycerin. Wal-Mart

claims that since its \$4 generic program began in the fall of 2006, customers have saved \$613 million. The generics represent 40% of all prescriptions filled in the last year. Because of state laws, some of the drugs cost more than \$4 in California, Colorado, Hawaii, Minnesota, Montana, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

### Partisan Views on Health Reform

While 82% of Democrats agreed that "it is the government's duty to ensure that all Americans have adequate health care coverage," only 47% of Republicans agreed with that statement, according to a WSJ.com/Harris Interactive online survey of 2,185 adults. And 59% of Republicans think the health care system could be improved by giving tax breaks to those who buy private health insurance, vs. 41% of Democrats, according to the September survey. More Democrats (37%) than Republicans (21%) think the most important issue is providing coverage for the uninsured, and more Republicans (33%) than Democrats (23%) put slowing costs at the top of their list. The survey also showed that more Americans believe the Democratic party can do a good job of reforming the health care system, but that trust is eroding, down to 39% in September 2007 from 50% in February 2007. In the current survey, only

26% trusted the Republican party to reform health care, down from 28% in February. Most Democrats (70%) think that of the current front-running presidential candidates, Sen. Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) is the most likely to be able to improve the health care system; Republicans (48%) think that former New York City mayor Rudolph Guiliani can do the job.

### Arkansas Reworks BMI Program

Arkansas' 4-year-old program to combat childhood obesity, which includes mandatory school-based body mass index screenings, appears to have halted the rise in the obesity rate for the state's children. A report released last month showed that nearly 21% of tested schoolchildren were overweight last year, while just over 17% were at risk for being overweight, about the same figures as the previous year. However, a new state law has reduced screenings to every other year and makes it easier for parents to opt out their children, leading some health experts in the state to voice fears that the changes could weaken the successful program. But Arkansas Surgeon General Dr. Joe Thompson said in an interview that scaling back the screenings will allow schools to concentrate scarce resources on the children and families who need the most help battling obesity.

—Joyce Frieden

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