

# Health Care Discrimination Harms Communities of Color in Alaska

Rapidly escalating medical costs and insurance premiums, rising numbers of people without coverage, and rip-offs by monopolistic private insurers have dominated the Alaska political dialogue surrounding President Barack Obama's plans for comprehensive health reform. On Capitol Hill, the American public is witnessing an historic clash of Washington special interest groups fighting to protect their revenue streams. Yet no one has more at stake than the 103 million people of color in the U.S.,<sup>1</sup> including the 233,000 in Alaska.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the nation's history, communities of color have been forced to accept health care that bears little resemblance to what is experienced by members of more advantaged groups. For people of color in Alaska and nationwide, life is shorter, chronic illness more prevalent and disability more common. These are predictable side-effects of a health care system that provides these communities in Alaska with narrower opportunities for regular health services, fewer treatment options and lower-quality care.

Despite growing evidence of racial disparities in health status and medical services, no system exists in Alaska for collecting comprehensive state and local data on disparities. As a result, many questions about the health of people of color in Alaska

remain unanswered. For example, it is not known how many African Americans or Latinos (compared to whites) have forgone care because they can't afford it. Life expectancy for African Americans in Alaska is 6 to 10 years shorter than that of whites.<sup>3</sup>

## Alaska Disparities

- Among Latinos in Alaska, 9.3 percent have asthma compared to 7.4 percent of whites.<sup>4</sup>
- The mortality rate for blacks in Alaska is 3 percent higher than for whites and 52 percent higher than for Latinos.<sup>5</sup>
- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that 8.4 percent of Alaska's labor force is unemployed.<sup>6</sup>
- In Alaska, 115,824 people were uninsured in 2007.<sup>7</sup>
- Health insurance premiums for Alaska working families have skyrocketed, increasing 74 percent from 2000 to 2007.<sup>8</sup>
- The full cost of employer-sponsored health insurance in Alaska is projected to grow at an annual rate of 7.3 percent, compared to a 0.5 percent decrease in income.<sup>9</sup>
- About 70,000 working non-elderly adults in Alaska lack health insurance. That comprises 64 percent of the total non-elderly uninsured population.<sup>10</sup>

**Alaska Racial and Ethnic Disparities by Health Indicator**

Health Indicator	White	African American	Latino	Other
Diabetes Mortality Rate (deaths per 100,000 population)	22.2	-	-	20.2
Annual AIDS Case Rate (per 100,000 population)	3.2	20.1	14.1	-
Living in Poverty	8.9%	-	16%	21%
Enrolled in Medicaid	9.7%	-	20%	19%
Uninsured	16%	-	17%	30%

Note: - denotes insufficient data in state.

Source: The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. "Key Health Indicators by Race/Ethnicity and State," 2009 update.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> US Census Bureau, "USA QuickFacts," 2008. Accessed at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Public Health and Science, Office of Women's Health. Quick Health Data Online, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Local Area Unemployment Statistics." Accessed at <http://www.bls.gov/web/lauhsthl.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation, "Health Insurance Coverage of the Total Population, states (2006-2007), U.S. (2007)." Accessed at <http://www.statehealthfacts.org/comparebar.jsp?ind=125&cat=3>.

<sup>8</sup> Families USA, "Premiums versus Paychecks," September 2008. Accessed at <http://www.familiesusa.org/resources/publications/reports/premiums-vs-paychecks-2008.html>.

<sup>9</sup> New America Foundation, "The State of State Health: The Cost of Failure (2007)" Accessed at <http://statehealth.newamerica.net/>.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Harbage, Ben Furnas, "Health Care in Crisis," Center for American Progress, May 4, 2009. Accessed at [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/05/working\\_uninsured\\_map.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/05/working_uninsured_map.html).