Patients’ advocates, bishops urge Bredesen to reconsider TennCare cuts

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NASHVILLE. Shawn Caster has seen both sides of the TennCare debate, as both a mother of a severely ill child who relies on the state-run health insurance plan for the poor and uninsurable and as an attorney with the Tennessee Justice Center, a non-profit law firm which represents TennCare users in federal court.

“We’re bracing for the worst and hoping for the best,” she says, speaking as a mother and a representative of other families fighting for medical coverage. Her 11-year-old son Julian has had TennCare coverage since he was born with a diaphragmatic hernia, pulmonary hypertension and cerebral palsy. He uses a wheelchair and has private-duty nursing care seven days a week.

While Gov. Phil Bredesen has repeatedly said that the 612,000 children now enrolled in TennCare will see no changes in their coverage, attorneys at the Tennessee Justice Center dispute that claim. They say that children whose parents are making the transition from welfare to work stand to lose coverage, as well as those with catastrophic illnesses. Other families will be facing higher co-payments and “could face lapses in their coverage if they can’t pay,” according to Caster, a 1991 graduate of St. Cecilia Academy and a member of St. Vincent de Paul Parish.

Since its inception 11 years ago, TennCare has continued to see the overall cost of the program rise at an unsustainable rate. Critics of Bredesen’s plan realize that changes had to be made to the program, but disagree with how they should be carried out. The Tennessee Catholic Public Policy Commission (CPPC) has been a strong supporter of preserving TennCare “in a fiscally responsible manner while ensuring that none of our citizens, particularly children, are left without health care.”

Since Bredesen announced his far-reaching proposal to remove 323,000 adults from the TennCare rolls earlier this month, patients’ advocates and those concerned about poor people’s access to healthcare are working to get a grasp on the issue.

“It’s mind-boggling,” said Sister Mary Kay Tyrell, D.C., chief of mission and ministry for Saint Thomas Health Services. Right now, she said, officials of the five-hospital system in Middle Tennessee still don’t have any specific answers to the question of how to care for the hundreds of thousands of people across the state who will soon be uninsured. “We’re thinking and praying,” about the issue, she said.
Saint Thomas operates two community clinics, on Charlotte Avenue and in the Nolensville/Harding Road area, to serve primarily poor and minority patients who are currently on TennCare or have no medical insurance and pay for services on a sliding scale fee.

This week the leaders of the three Catholic dioceses of Tennessee, and co-chairs of the Catholic Public Policy Commission, Bishop Terry Steib of Memphis, Bishop Joseph Kurtz of Knoxville and Father David Choby, diocesan administrator of Nashville, drafted a letter to the governor, calling for him to “provide for those who are left without the safety net that TennCare has provided for the last decade.”

On Monday, Bredesen pledged that facilities such as county health departments, community and faith-based clinics would receive funds to treat those being cut from TennCare.

In their letter, the bishops noted that the Catholic healthcare systems operating across the state provide millions of dollars worth of indigent care each year but “providing medical care for everyone who needs and deserves care is a bigger problem than all of the faith-based providers in the state can solve alone.”

In addition to the Saint Thomas Health Care System in Middle Tennessee, there are two Catholic hospitals located in the Diocese of Knoxville, and one health care center. The Diocese of Memphis operates several homes for the aged and other facilities for the needy.

The bishops said that the state should “serve as responsible stewards of all of its healthcare resources in a manner that meets everyone’s fundamental right to appropriate medical care.”

Under Bredesen’s plan, previously unlimited benefits such as physician visits, lab work and prescriptions will be significantly limited. Now, for example, each TennCare patient will be allowed only four prescriptions per month.

Tennessee Justice Center attorney Caster said one of the biggest threats for those remaining on the TennCare rolls is how coverage will be limited, in particular, how the “medical necessity” clause of TennCare plan will be interpreted. As the law now reads, “the TennCare program” has the final say as to which services and items are medically necessary.

“I don’t agree with that because it’s more appropriate for a person who has a relationship with the patient, knows their diagnosis and medical needs to determine their treatment,” Caster said.

Despite the cutbacks and changes, she is thankful that “we’re not returning to
bare-bones Medicare coverage."

Caster wants to see the state’s insurance program changed “without cutting off enrollees and placing harsh and unheard of penalties for people desperately dependent on TennCare for their medical needs.”

Bishops' letter to Governor Bredesen

Dear Governor Bredesen,

We, the leaders of the three Roman Catholic Dioceses in Tennessee, approach you with a request that you reconsider your proposed reforms of TennCare in an effort to impact as few recipients as possible. Further, we call on you to join with the many faith based and community based programs to find ways to provide for those who are left without the safety net that TennCare has provided for the last decade.

We firmly believe that each person is entitled to basic human dignity, and that we have an obligation, rooted in Christ’s teaching, to care for the weakest in our midst. We also recognize the demands that you face in your role as the chief executive of the State of Tennessee. Clearly you inherited a massive TennCare system that cries out for substantial change. We support your efforts to ensure the financial stability of the State of Tennessee because the state has a duty to fund the education and safety needs that will provide for the long term good of its citizens. We trust that in your review of the TennCare program, its long term financial viability and its impact on the entire state budget, you have thoroughly examined the many proposals to implement cost saving controls. Nevertheless, we fear greatly the effects which the proposed cuts will have on the people of our State and strongly urge you to redouble your efforts to minimize the cuts to those who most need care. We have attached an appendix listing several promising proposals that may make TennCare more efficient and effective.

We, for our part, recognize an obligation to join with the state to care for the needy. Through the Catholic healthcare systems operating across the state, we provide millions of dollars worth of indigent care. Whether in clinics or in hospital settings, our institutions and our people are providing care that makes a real difference in the lives of people without regard to their religious affiliation. However, providing medical care for everyone who needs and deserve care is a bigger problem than all of the faith based providers in the state can solve alone. We ask that as you make legitimate and proper management decisions in the area of healthcare delivery, you remember the important role that the state plays in coordinating and supporting a system to care for all Tennesseans. The state should serve as responsible stewards of all of its healthcare resources in a manner that meets everyone’s fundamental right to appropriate medical care. We stand ready to work with you in this area.

We are sure that you fully understand thousands of people will continue to face critical healthcare needs even though they are no longer on the TennCare rolls.
These unmet needs will have ripple effects across the state, throughout its economy, and most importantly, in the lives of its neediest citizens.

Sincerely,
Bishop Terry Steib, Diocese of Memphis
Bishop Joseph Kurtz, Diocese of Knoxville
Father David Choby, Administrator, Diocese of Nashville