

October 9, 2013

Dear Medicaid Innovation and Reform Commission Members,

I am writing on behalf of the Board of Directors and staff of Mountain Empire Older Citizens, Inc. (MEOC), a multi-generational private non-profit corporation that has served the citizens of far southwest Virginia for close to 40 years, to ask for your endorsement of expanding Medicaid coverage in Virginia. In the course of our service to literally thousands and thousands of persons annually in need of all ages in Lee, Wise, Scott Counties and the City of Norton, we are well positioned to see and hear firsthand the havoc, heartbreak and terrible personal consequences that lack of health insurance causes for far too many of our region's citizens.

When Virginia opted not to participate in expanding the income eligibility for Medicaid to 138% of poverty, we immediately knew that many of our lowest income friends, neighbors and relatives, many working one or more minimum wage jobs, would still not be covered by health insurance. They would be barred from getting the tax credits to buy insurance in the new health exchange and would also be ineligible for Medicaid. These are exactly the people that all Virginians anticipated being assisted, the working poor. These are the ones about whom we in southwest Virginia were concerned the most.

We personally know so many of these people left out in the cold with no protection and we know their families and their personal stories. Coming immediately to mind are the very many personal care aides and homemakers working in long term care services performing the incredibly important responsibility of caring for our frailest and neediest older citizens by keeping them safe and secure in their own homes, thereby preventing unnecessary institutionalizations. We think also of the many families in which the parents who work so hard every day are still without health insurance struggling to keep their families together in an area of high poverty, low wages, increasing unemployment.

We think as well of the many people who line up for days at a time camping outside the gates to get free medical care at the Remote Area Medical (RAM) Event held one weekend per year at the Wise Fairgrounds in Wise County. Over 2400 people are seen each year at RAM. For many, this is their one chance yearly to receive medical care. RAM Executive Director Stan Brock says that the Wise RAM serves more people than the ones held anywhere else in this nation and more also than ones held in third world nations.

Virginia Health Statistics show that adults of working age in far southwest Virginia are dying between 42% and 100% faster than their peers in Virginia as a whole. Virginia Health Statistics show that death rates from several common causes are significantly higher in far southwest Virginia than in Virginia as a whole. People in the far southwest are

- 30% more likely to die from heart disease
- 11% more likely to die from cancer
- 59% more likely to die from chronic lower respiratory diseases
- 92% more likely to die from unintentional injuries
- 41% more likely to die from pneumonia and influenza

- 43% more likely to die from diabetes
- 91% more likely to commit suicide.

Our region continues to be in the midst of a health crisis among its citizens which only seems to get worse. The Affordable Care Act will only work as it was intended if Medicaid eligibility is expanded. Otherwise, the dismal health statistics for the people of Central Appalachian Virginia will continue to grow more dismal.

Southwest Virginia is in economic disarray. The expansion of Medicaid would stimulate our local economy by creating jobs and by bringing more economic stability to our struggling hospitals. One hospital in our area, Lee Regional Hospital, recently closed citing Virginia's decision not to expand Medicaid eligibility as a major reason. Federal funding is available to cover more uninsured Virginians, but Virginia has chosen for Virginians' federal taxes to be distributed to other states which have made the wise and humane decision to cover more of their hardworking citizens with health insurance.

For far too many years, Virginia's Medicaid coverage has been one of the most restrictive in the nation. Virginia ranks 48 out of the 50 states in per capita Medicaid spending. An investment in health coverage for all Virginians would reap so many benefits, would strengthen us as a people and would result in a more robust economy. It would go a long way toward addressing regional health disparities. Where you live in Virginia should not determine your life expectancy.

You have the most unbelievable opportunity to substantively address longstanding health disparities across Virginia while bringing sustainable economic growth to all areas of the Commonwealth. We all strongly support the expansion of Medicaid in Virginia. Our fellow citizens, over 400,000 of them, deserve the health coverage available to them under Medicaid and which would be available to them only if they lived elsewhere.

Sincerely,

Michael Wampler
Executive Director