



### Women in Vermont Need Health Reform

Today, too many women in Vermont depend on a health care system that is failing them. They have trouble affording necessary care, face unfair insurance industry practices, or struggle to find insurance that covers the benefits they need. Health reform must ensure that all women in Vermont and across the nation have access to the comprehensive, high-quality, and affordable health care they need.

In the absence of health reform, more and more women and families will lose their health insurance, with an estimated 9,970 Vermont residents losing coverage between 2008 and 2010.<sup>1</sup> Family premiums will continue to skyrocket, reaching a projected \$24,747 for Vermont families by 2016.<sup>2</sup> Women in Vermont simply cannot afford the status quo. Women’s well-being—and that of their families—depends on health reform that meets their needs.

### Why Do Women in Vermont Need Health Reform?

#### Women in Vermont Face Unfair and Discriminatory Insurance Industry Practices

- Insurers in Vermont are allowed to consider gender when setting premium rates in the individual health insurance market, where people buy coverage directly from insurance companies. Vermont imposes a rate band to limit the amount premiums can vary by gender. Still, as a result of “gender rating,” women are often charged more than men for the exact same coverage.<sup>3</sup>

#### Women in Vermont Have More Trouble Affording Necessary Health Care

- Women are generally poorer than men, and in Vermont earn just 84 cents for every dollar men earn.<sup>4</sup> Women also use the health care system more, in part due to their reproductive health needs.<sup>5</sup>
- Because they are poorer and use more care, women spend a greater share of their income on their health needs. Women are more likely than men to struggle with medical bills or debt, and to report cost-related problems with accessing health care.<sup>6</sup> For instance, 13% of women in Vermont report not visiting a doctor due to high costs.<sup>7</sup>
- Women without coverage are especially likely to experience cost-related barriers to care. In 2007, 13% of all women in Vermont were uninsured.<sup>8</sup>
- Even women with health insurance report problems affording health care. Unaffordable cost-sharing requirements, annual limits on covered services, or health plan limits on lifetime expenditures have a disproportionate impact on women. They are more likely than men to be underinsured, meaning they have coverage that leaves their financial and physical health at risk.<sup>9</sup>

#### Women in Vermont Struggle to Find Coverage for the Benefits They Need

- Women, on average, visit health providers more often than men and use more preventive care. They are also more likely to suffer from a chronic condition requiring ongoing care, such as asthma or arthritis.<sup>10</sup> If a health plan does not cover a comprehensive set of health benefits, women may struggle to pay out-of-pocket for necessary health care that is not covered by their plan, or they may delay or skip that care altogether.

- It may be very difficult for women to find coverage for maternity care in the individual health insurance market.<sup>11</sup>

## **How Can Health Reform Help Women in Vermont and Across the Country?**

### **Health Reform Must End Harmful Insurance Industry Practices**

- Health reform should impose strict regulations on insurance, including the elimination of gender rating; a requirement that health insurers accept all applicants for coverage regardless of their medical history; and a prohibition on pre-existing condition exclusions.
- While Vermont already has state laws that protect residents from many harmful industry practices, most states do not. Vermont's protections are not portable, and will be lost if a woman relocates to a different state. Health reform must guarantee robust regulations in every state and across all health insurance markets, so that women are protected from unfair and discriminatory practices no matter where they live.

### **Health Reform Should Help Women Obtain Affordable Health Insurance**

- Health reform should include subsidies to make coverage more affordable for low and middle-income families. A subsidy program available to people with incomes of up to 400% of the FPL, for instance, would mean that approximately 23,000 women in Vermont (using 2006-2007 data) could be eligible for a federal health insurance subsidy to help with premiums and out-of-pocket costs.<sup>12</sup>

### **Health Reform Should Ensure that Women Have Access to the Health Benefits They Need to Stay Healthy and Be Treated When Sick**

- Health reform should require all health insurance plans to provide, at a minimum, a broad range of medical benefits (such as maternity care, prescription drugs and mental health services) and should establish a panel of medical experts, consumer advocates, and other key stakeholders to determine the details of benefit package requirements.
- Health reform should limit or eliminate cost-sharing for preventive services so that copayments and deductibles never serve as a barrier to accessing the care women need to stay healthy.

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<sup>1</sup> Families USA (2009), *The Clock is Ticking: More Americans Losing Health Coverage*, <http://www.familiesusa.org/assets/pdfs/health-reform/clock-is-ticking.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Axeen and Elizabeth Carpenter, New America Foundation (2009), *The Cost of Doing Nothing: Why the Cost of Failing to Fix Our Health System is Greater than the Cost of Reform*, [http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/cost\\_doing\\_nothing](http://www.newamerica.net/publications/policy/cost_doing_nothing)

<sup>3</sup> For more information about gender rating in the individual insurance market, see: National Women's Law Center (2008), *Nowhere to Turn: How the Individual Insurance Market Fails Women*, <http://action.nwlc.org/insurance>

<sup>4</sup> National Women's Law Center (2009), *Falling Short in Every State: The Wage Gap and Harsh Economic Realities for Women Persist*, <http://www.nwlc.org/fairpay/statefacts.html>

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Patchias and Judy Waxman, National Women's Law Center (2007), *Women and Health Coverage: The Affordability Gap*, <http://www.nwlc.org/pdf/NWLCCommonwealthHealthInsuranceIssueBrief2007.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Sheila D. Rustgi, Michelle M. Doty, and Sara R. Collins, The Commonwealth Fund (2009), *Women at Risk: Why Many Women are Forgoing Needed Health Care*, <http://www.commonwealthfund.org/Content/Publications/Issue-Briefs/2009/May/Women-at-Risk.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Kaiser Family Foundation (2009), *Putting Women's Health Disparities on the Map*, <http://www.statehealthfacts.org/comparemapreport.jsp?rep=31&cat=15>

<sup>8</sup> National Women's Law Center analysis of 2007 data on health coverage from the Current Population Survey's 2008 Annual Social and Economic Supplement, using CPS Table Creator, [http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstc/cps\\_table\\_creator.html](http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstc/cps_table_creator.html)

<sup>9</sup> *Women at Risk*, supra note 8

<sup>10</sup> Salganicoff et al., *The Kaiser Family Foundation, Women and Health Care: A National Profile* (KFF, Menlo Park, CA: July 2005); U.S. Census Bureau, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2009*, "Table 159 – Ambulatory Care Visits to Physicians' Offices and Hospital Outpatient and Emergency Departments: 2006"

<sup>11</sup> *Nowhere to Turn*, supra note 3

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Includes an estimated 17,000 uninsured women and 6,000 women who currently purchase coverage from the individual health insurance market.