Cancer Patients Struggling to Afford Care and Pay Bills in Troubled Economy, According to New Poll

Strong Implementation of and Education about Affordable Care Act Critical for Cancer Community; Increased Access Coupled with Research Key to Progress in Beating Disease

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A new poll illustrates the difficulty that cancer patients, survivors and their families face in affording needed health care and paying for other basic necessities such as food and heat, underscoring the need to strongly implement the Affordable Care Act so that it works for people with cancer.

The national nonpartisan poll of families affected by cancer finds that nearly half of cancer patients and survivors under age 65 have had difficulty paying for health care costs such as health insurance premiums, co-pays and prescription drugs in the past two years, and that one-third of those currently in active cancer treatment have put off some type of health care in the past year.

The survey, conducted for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), also found that families affected by cancer are having trouble affording non-medical bills, with 1 in 3 of those under age 65 struggling to pay for basic necessities, such as food, heat and housing, and other bills in the past two years, and 1 in 5 using up all or most of their savings during that time.

The survey found that 1 in 3 cancer patients or survivors under the age of 65 has been uninsured at some point since diagnosis, and nearly 1 in 5 families affected by cancer lost their insurance because a family member lost their job or their employer dropped coverage for reasons unrelated to the cancer diagnosis.

"Tough economic times have magnified the barriers to quality, affordable health care that cancer patients and their loved ones have long faced, and they reinforce why the 'sick care' system fails Americans with life-threatening chronic diseases such as cancer," said John R. Seffrin, PhD, CEO of the American Cancer Society and its advocacy affiliate, ACS CAN. "The Affordable Care Act has the potential to effect meaningful reform for cancer patients, survivors and their loved ones by transforming the system to one that focuses on prevention and provides access to the full spectrum of coverage including prevention, evidence-based treatment and patient-centered care."

Research by the Society has shown that lack of access to care can lead to later stage diagnoses, and that people with private insurance have better chances of surviving cancer than people who are uninsured. Giving all Americans access to quality health care is critical to defeating cancer, which kills an estimated 565,000 people each year.

While cancer patients, survivors and their loved ones are acutely aware of the gaps in the broken health care system, they are far less familiar with many of the provisions in the new law that will directly benefit them. The survey found that 7 in 10 people with cancer or living with someone with cancer do not know that new insurance plans will be required to provide free cancer screenings, and 55 percent do not know that lifetime benefit limits will be banned. More than half of respondents were not aware that prescription drug costs will be reduced in Medicare with the phase-out of the Part D "doughnut hole," and nearly two-thirds were unaware that the law creates a high-risk pool for uninsured people with a pre-existing condition. Once they discovered that the law covers these and other provisions, no fewer than 8 in 10 poll respondents supported each one.

ACS CAN continues to be the leading voice of patients and is actively working to ensure that the law is applied as strongly as possible for cancer patients, survivors and their loved ones. To that end, ACS CAN has specific implementation priorities that are critical to meaningfully improving the health care system for people with cancer:

High-Risk Pool - The new federal high-risk pool is meant to be a safety net for people who don't have other insurance options and are seen as high insurance risks because of pre-existing conditions such as cancer. For

the high-risk pool to work for people with cancer, it must cover all necessary care and not create an undue financial strain on patients.

State Health Benefit Exchanges - By 2014, people who cannot purchase insurance through their employers will be able to shop for coverage through a new insurance marketplace in their state called an exchange. ACS CAN will monitor the creation of the new exchanges to ensure that the plans they offer cover necessary screenings, treatments and follow-up care for people with cancer.

Prevention - One goal of the new law is to transform the health care system to focus on keeping people well rather than treating people once they get sick. ACS CAN, in partnership with the American Cancer Society, will work to ensure that all Americans have access to proven prevention measures at low- or no-cost.

Medicaid - The federal/state program that previously provided health coverage to select groups such as low-income parents and the disabled will be expanded by 2014 to include all Americans under 65 who earn up to 133 percent of the federal poverty level. ACS CAN is urging that the benefits offered address the needs of families affected by cancer, and that the National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program continues to operate as a vital safety net for those without access to lifesaving cancer screenings.

The survey found that 89 percent of families affected by cancer feel investment in research to find better ways to prevent, detect and treat cancer should be a top national priority and nearly two-thirds of respondents say they are more likely to re-elect an elected official who advocated for more cancer research and prevention programs.

"While improving access to care for all Americans will help to make tremendous strides in our ability to reduce death and suffering related to cancer, sustained funding for cancer research is also critical to a comprehensive approach to defeating this disease," said Christopher W. Hansen, president of ACS CAN. "An estimated 1.4 million people will be diagnosed with cancer this year and research holds the key to advances in early detection and treatment so this disease becomes one we can live well with, rather than die from."

ACS CAN is calling on Congress to sustain funding provided last year in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and provide the National Institutes of Health with $35.2 billion, including $5.8 billion for the National Cancer Institute in the FY 2011 Labor, Health and Human Services appropriations bill.

The poll was conducted May 21-June 2 among 1,011 registered voters nationwide by Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research and Consulting. For a summary of the polling results, visit http://bit.ly/ablkXR.

ACS CAN, the nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy affiliate of the American Cancer Society, supports evidence-based policy and legislative solutions designed to eliminate cancer as a major health problem. ACS CAN works to encourage elected officials and candidates to make cancer a top national priority. ACS CAN gives ordinary people extraordinary power to fight cancer with the training and tools they need to make their voices heard. For more information, visit www.acscan.org.

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