



BLACK FOLK MUST ADOVDATE FOR HEALTH CARE REFORM BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

Congress seems to be putting the final touches on health care reform legislation, arranging to provide health care, especially, for the uninsured. Anyone who has made the summer rounds of civil rights conventions understand that African American policy makers care about this issue. Still there seems to be no passion I advocacy for heath care reform.

Our presence in this debate is much needed – we have a dog in this fight. African Americans are more likely than others to be uninsured, so the many ways our new legislation will make insurance available is important. And even when we are insured, the way that health problems hit us are most different. According to the Centers for Disease Control, African Americans and Hispanics “bear a disproportionate burden of disease, injury, and disability.” African Americans, in particular, are more likely to be killed or to die of HIV than others are.

There is more – we are more likely to be obese, to have high blood pressure, diabetes, or to experience strokes. The obesity hits us early – our children are carrying more weight than they need to, and our community has done little to promote healthy eating. We experience cancer earlier than others, especially (for black women)_ breast cancer, and we are often diagnosed too late for diagnosis to save us.

We should be clear that many health disparities are the outcome of racial bias and racism in our lives and experiences. And many health disparities are the result of our own unwillingness to deal with the health challenges that face our community. For example, the fact that African American women are about 11 times more likely to be diagnosed with HIV than majority women is partly a function of sex education in our community. WE really can't blame racism for the fact that in an age of easily available information, too many sisters continue to put themselves at risk. Ditto obesity. While we can talk about the availability of healthy food choices in inner cities, the fact is that there is also much information available about how to eat and live more healthily. Race may play a role in the ways our health disparities play out, but our own engagement in our health outcomes also plays a role.

As health care reform legislation snakes its way through the congress and senate, it is disheartening to see the few who are involved in the legislation and the many who are silent. You can't live without a healthy life, can't agitate for justice without the stamina for agitation. Yet there are so many African American people who are proud, passionate and sidelined by their health challenges. Where is the intense advocacy in our community, an advocacy that will propel us to be key activists in the health reform legislation? African American people need the means and ends to healthy lives. We need to push hard for the health care reform that the Obama administration is promoting.

Possibly, our legislators will kick the can toward health care reform, producing legislation in the next several days. The goal was that they would have come to conclusion by August 7, but there is a clear possibility that discussion of this legislation will continue after the recess. What needs to happen, now and later, is that we need to hear black voices raised in support of health care reform. We need to hear black voices put all of this in context. We need to make sure that we all understand how critical it is for people to have access to health insurance and to health care. In so many ways, access to health care is the foundation of our energy and survival. A community that has been economically marginalized gains much when health care is made available to the broadest range of people.

Health disparities are a function of the many racial inequities that plague our society. If you scratch an African American, she can tell you what she thought of the Henry Louis Gates arrest or the beer summit. How many can recite the details of the health legislation and the many ways it can enhance the African American community. Priorities, priorities. Health care reform will improve the health status of the African American community.

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