

This is a letter to the editor that I submitted to the Kansas City Star. Please feel free to contact me with any comments or suggestions!

February 13, 2007

Dear Editor,

While a universal health care system has garnered support from many recent readers' letters to *The Star*, it's time to face reality in Missouri: a universal health insurance plan is simply not in our near future. What *is* in our very near future is the sunset of the state's Medicaid plan, to be replaced in 2008 by Missouri HealthNet. We should use this valuable opportunity to talk about realistic changes that can be made in order to expand coverage to the 700,000 Missourians who currently live without any form of health insurance.

One way to make Missouri Medicaid more cost-efficient is to eliminate the system's reliance on institutionalized care for people who are elderly and people with disabilities. These two groups of Medicaid recipients make up only 23% of the Medicaid population, but account for 67% of the program's total expenditure, partly because of the high costs of institutionalized care. Many people who live in nursing homes and residential facilities do not need institutionalized care, and would prefer to live at home and in their communities, but are forced into nursing homes because Missouri Medicaid will not provide coverage for home-based care. This institutional bias is puzzling, as home-based care not only improves quality of life, it is also less than half as costly as facility-based care. Such significant savings would allow Medicaid to provide better coverage for more low-income Missourians, making our state healthier and stronger. It might not be time for universal health care, but it is time to eliminate Missouri Medicaid's institutional bias in long-term health care.

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