

Opinion: Barring illegal immigrants from health plans would hit California hard

San Jose Mercury News (California)

December 7, 2009 Monday

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Section: NEWS; **Opinion**

Length: 482 words

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Body

One of the red-hot aspects of the heated political debate over a national **health** insurance system is whether millions of **illegal immigrants** a quarter of whom live in **California** will be included or excluded.

And to **California**'s deficit-plagued budget, it's not merely an ideological squabble. If a **health** coverage agreement can be reached, inclusion or exclusion of **illegal immigrants** from benefits could have multibillion-dollar effects on the budget.

It's estimated that there are 12 million **illegal immigrants**, most of them from Latin America, in the United States. About 3 million of them reside in **California**. Some receive **health** coverage through employers, about 800,000 receive state **health** care of some kind and others are treated in emergency rooms and public clinics, whose costs often **hit** taxpayers.

Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., infamously shouted "you lie" to President Barack Obama when he told Congress that federal **health** care "would not apply to those who are here illegally," thus triggering furious maneuvering in Congress and linking the heated **health** care issue to the even hotter immigration issue.

Both Democratic versions purport to deny, or at least restrict, federal benefits to **illegal immigrants**. But conservative critics contend that a mandate on employers to provide **health** coverage would indirectly provide benefits to **illegal** workers.

The White House persuaded the Senate to ban **illegal immigrants** from receiving federal **health** subsidies or participating in a federally sponsored insurance purchasing pool with their own money. The House version, however, would allow **illegal immigrants** to participate in the pool.

Meanwhile, the congressional Latino caucus, including many Californians, and Latino rights groups are demanding that immigration status be disconnected from **health** care. "We feel that our community is not being fully represented in the conversation and need to be more aggressively represented," Lillian Rodriguez Lopez, president of the Hispanic Federation, told The Washington Post.

The debate affects approximately 2 million **illegal immigrants** in **California** who lack **health** insurance. State officials have conducted no detailed studies of the impact because the bills themselves are constantly changing. It appears, however, that the state budget would benefit should **illegal immigrants** be included, but would incur even higher costs if they are excluded largely because it's virtually certain that national **health** care would expand eligibility for Medi-Cal, the program now serving about 7 million low-income Californians, by raising income limits.

By one congressional analysis, increased eligibility would cost **California** an additional \$1.4 billion a year.

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That's a heavy blow on a budget that's already billions of dollars out of balance, in part because of rising Medi-Cal costs, now about \$14 billion a year.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (92%); IMMIGRATION (90%); HEALTH CARE POLICY (89%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (89%); NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE (89%); US STATE IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); POLITICAL DEBATES (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); LEGISLATION (78%); GOVERNMENT HEALTH INSURANCE (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); POLITICS (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); MUNICIPAL FINANCE (77%); US CONGRESS (75%); LOW INCOME PERSONS (73%); CONSERVATISM (73%); CAUCUSES (73%); AGREEMENTS (71%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (68%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (68%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (60%)

Company: GRAHAM HOLDINGS CO (53%); NASH HOLDINGS LLC (53%); SACRAMENTO BEE (50%)

Ticker: GHC (NYSE) (53%)

Industry: INSURANCE COVERAGE (90%); BUDGETS (90%); HEALTH CARE POLICY (89%); NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE (89%); GOVERNMENT BUDGETS (78%); GOVERNMENT HEALTH INSURANCE (78%); BUDGET DEFICITS (78%); UNDERINSURED & UNINSURED PATIENTS (78%); EMERGENCY ROOMS (73%)

Person: JOE WILSON (58%); BARACK OBAMA (58%)

Geographic: CALIFORNIA, USA (94%); UNITED STATES (79%); LATIN AMERICA (57%)

Load-Date: January 7, 2012