

Why undocumented immigrants should have access to health care

The Catholic Spirit, May 2, 2025



The Minnesota Catholic Conference (MCC) and its partner organization, the Catholic Health Association-Minnesota, have long advocated for allowing the state's undocumented immigrant community, particularly children, to access health insurance through MinnesotaCare.

Access was granted in the 2023 legislative session, yet enrollment has outpaced initial expectations. With a tight budget forecast, some legislators are proposing that access to this subsidized program for low-income Minnesotans be eliminated. MCC is opposed to the cuts, especially for children.

Whether the program will be more expensive than anticipated is unclear and, either way, we are inviting lawmakers to find creative ways to preserve health care access for immigrants while controlling costs.

Health care access comes through insurance

Like it or not, unless you are able to afford often prohibitive out-of-pocket expenses for health care, you rely on some form of health insurance, whether purchased on the insurance market, provided by your employer, or accessed through a government program. That is the system that we have. MinnesotaCare, the state's subsidized health insurance program, gives low-income people who do not qualify for Medicaid the opportunity to purchase at a reduced cost a basic health care plan.

In general, undocumented immigrants are ineligible for Medicaid and cannot access the Affordable Care Act's insurance marketplace. So, unless an undocumented immigrant has the means for very expensive commercial insurance, MinnesotaCare is the only option for him or her.

Because immigrants have a right to treatment, they can access emergency services which end up being extremely costly to both the insurance pool and the taxpayer. It is for those reasons, and others, that many health care provider organizations — including the Minnesota Hospital Association and the Minnesota Medical Association — supported the MinnesotaCare Immigrant Inclusion Act in 2023.

But why are we “rewarding illegals”?

Refusing to provide access to health insurance or other services based solely on one’s legal status is a simplistic and blunt approach to a more complex problem. Businesses, advocacy groups, and politicians have long taken advantage of our broken immigration system to induce many people to come here, and those who do can rarely get legal status or citizenship. As the late Pope Francis said, immigrants are sometimes treated like “pawns on the chessboard of humanity.”

The system needs to be fixed at the federal level, and not just with a more secure border. Until then, as Minnesotans, we can take steps to ensure the dignity and needs of our immigrant brothers and sisters, such as providing access to basic services to all people.

Undocumented immigrants, the vast majority of whom will not likely be deported, are willing to pay insurance premiums to receive health care access. The program need not be free or cheaper than what U.S. citizens pay. But they do need access to health insurance as health care is an important component of stewarding the gift of life that God has given to each of us.

State budgets are a moral document and should prioritize the protection of human dignity before other amenities. Those amenities include renovations to sports arenas, and what are essentially subsidies for favored political allies, whether businesses, unions, or the government itself.

Education, shelter, health care (including for the elderly, immigrant, chronically ill and those with disability), a social safety net for the poor and vulnerable, and relieving the economic burden on families who are doing the most important work of raising the next generation should be budget priorities. And, in general, Minnesota can be proud of its track record. But it does not mean that further adjustments cannot be made to existing programs, or that spending priorities cannot be reconfigured to meet these goals.

Protecting the MinnesotaCare program should remain a key priority for Catholics in solidarity with our immigrant brothers and sisters.

Inside the Capitol is a legislative update from Minnesota Catholic Conference staff.