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## ***Cover the Uninsured Week Kicks Off in New Orleans***

*Data on the Costs of Not Caring for the Uninsured Shows Need for Solutions*

New Orleans, LA — A diverse coalition of New Orleans organizations today launched *Cover the Uninsured Week* at an event featuring Dr. Fred Cerise, Louisiana Secretary of Health and Hospitals, Dr. Kevin Stephens, Director of the City of New Orleans Health Department, Chip Kahn, President of the American Federation of Hospitals, and a host of appointed and elected leaders.

In a study released today the Kaiser Commission on Medicaid and the Uninsured estimates that the United States will spend \$41 billion for uncompensated care for the uninsured in 2004. Federal, state and local governments will incur as much as 85 percent of these costs, according to the study, which notes that even with uncompensated care; people who are uninsured for the entire year “can expect to receive about half as much care as people who are fully insured.”

This study comes on the heels of new research from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the national sponsor of *Cover the Uninsured Week*, which found that 20 million working adults in the U.S. are uninsured, including more than 400,000 in Louisiana. Both reports have been released to coincide with *Cover the Uninsured Week*, the largest national educational effort on the issue of health coverage and the uninsured.

“What this report tells us is that while we spend significantly on health care in this country and in Louisiana, millions of Americans still don’t get the health care they need because they do not have health insurance,” said Dr. Fred Cerise, secretary of the Department of Health and Hospitals.

“Addressing this problem has become a key priority in Louisiana. Over the past several years, we have successfully used our Medicaid and LaCHIP programs to cover more children, but 21 percent of our adult population remains uninsured. We must find ways to address this disparity, and ensure access to quality health care for all of our citizens.”

“Hospitals are on the front lines of the nation’s uninsurance crisis,” remarked Mr. Kahn of the Federation of American Hospitals, a Washington, D.C. trade association representing investor-owned hospital companies. “We are the caregivers of last resort for those who lack health insurance. To solve this crisis, it’s going to take hospitals, doctors, insurers, business, labor, and consumers working together to persuade the policymakers to act.”

More than 100 organizations, including AARP Louisiana, The United Way of Greater New Orleans, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Louisiana, Agenda For Children, Southeast Coalition for Covering Kids and Families, New Orleans District Nurses Association, Orleans Parish Medical Society, Archdiocese of New Orleans, the Metropolitan Hospital Council of New Orleans, The Jewish Federation of Greater New Orleans, Ochsner Health Plan, Louisiana Public Health Institute, EXCELth, Inc., UNO Small Business Development Center, Urban League of Greater New Orleans and the Women’s Health Access Project, among others, are involved in organizing *Cover the Uninsured Week* in New Orleans, Louisiana. More than 1,700 activities are planned nationwide during the *Week*.

A complete listing of the scheduled events in New Orleans and the thousands around the country is available at [www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org](http://www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org). Additional findings from the Kaiser report, “The Cost of Not Covering the Uninsured,” are available online at <http://www.kff.org/covertheuninsured2004>.

At the kick-off event held at Gallier Hall, Dr. Fred Cerise, Louisiana Secretary of Health and Hospitals, Dr. Kevin Stephens, New Orleans Director of Health, Chip Kahn, President American Federation of Hospitals, Michael Andry, President EXCELth, Inc. and Tonia Aiken, President of the New Orleans District Nurses Associations among other coalition members and news conference attendees signed a statement of commitment to work collaboratively to raise the awareness of the issues associated with uninsured Americans.

They also heard from Ruth Idakula who described how living without health insurance has affected her life.

“Being uninsured means living with fear everyday,” said Ruth Idakula. “I fear getting sick and not being able to work, I fear an injury that will leave me with bills I am unable to pay and I fear getting a regular check-up that results in finding something that needs further treatment. I am here today, because I fear this problem will not be solved unless more people speak out, tell their stories and demand this issue receive the attention it deserves.”

Today’s event follows the national launch of *Cover the Uninsured Week* on May 5, which featured U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN), U.S. Senator Jay Rockefeller (D-WV), and Noah Wyle, star of television’s “ER,” who serves as the campaign’s national spokesperson. *Cover the Uninsured Week* is the largest mobilization in history on behalf of uninsured men, women and children in America. Former presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter are the honorary co-chairs.

According to the most recent information from the Census Bureau, there are nearly 44 million Americans living without health coverage—including 8.5 million children. In 2002, the number of people without health care coverage increased by more than 2 million, the largest one-year increase in a decade. In Louisiana, 820,000 are estimated to be uninsured.

“This issue is about all of us and that is why so many of us are here representing diverse organizations that are calling for the same thing – health care coverage for every man, woman and child in America,” said Michael Andry, President and Chief Executive Officer of EXCELth, Inc.

*Cover the Uninsured Week*, working with Families USA, a national health care consumer advocacy organization, developed a resource guide in English and Spanish that details what help may be available to residents of Louisiana who do not have health coverage. The guide contains information on free or low-cost health insurance programs, community health centers, free clinics and pharmaceutical assistance programs.

The guide will be available at the health and enrollment fairs taking place as part of *Cover the Uninsured Week*, and at [www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org](http://www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org). In addition, the guide can be obtained by calling a toll-free telephone number – 1 (888) 538-4371. The toll-free number is funded in part by Pfizer Inc, and offers help in both English and Spanish.

*Cover the Uninsured Week* in New Orleans is funded primarily by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the nation's largest philanthropy dedicated exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans. The California Endowment and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation also are providing significant funds for events throughout the Nation. To view the research reports released as part of *Cover the Uninsured Week* log on to [www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org](http://www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org).

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