Editorial

The Need for Research and Evaluation of State Health Reforms

Massachusetts' enactment of near universal health insurance coverage in 2006 created enthusiasm among proponents of health care reform that the initiative would spark a series of similar legislative successes in states across the country. Yet the other dominoes have not fallen. States like Vermont, Maine, and Illinois have made major strides with their reform strategies, but no state has gone as far as Massachusetts.

Although states have been slow to follow Massachusetts' lead, many of them are talking seriously about reform. This summer, 14 states participated in a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF)-funded "Coverage Institute," organized by AcademyHealth's *State Coverage Initiatives* (SCI) program. State teams that included legislative, agency, and administration leaders attended workshops to discuss strategies for reform. Researchers and health policy experts were on hand to provide technical assistance to the state teams on topics ranging from the implications of 125 plans and ERISA to the best strategies for outreach and enrollment of low-income children in SCHIP plans, mechanisms to reform the private health insurance market, and how to build evaluations into reform legislation. The success of the Coverage Institute buoyed hopes that attendees would return to their respective states to try to develop legislative strategies to increase access to care, constrain costs, and improve the quality of care.

One important element that has arisen from the state reform discussions is the need for solid evidence from rigorous state-level research and policy analysis. In many instances, state-level policymakers simply lack sufficient information about crucial questions concerning the impact of state reform. Key questions include: How many uninsured people will be covered and what will be the cost to the state? How will coverage expansions affect access to health care services? Given the small sample size of the Current Population Survey in many states, what is the best way to measure the change in health insurance coverage over time? Will state investments in electronic medical

records, disease management, and adverse event reporting improve the quality of health care? How do we measure quality and improvements in quality? How can states develop financing strategies that are sustainable and politically feasible? States also lack critical information about the environmental factors that are most important in determining a reform's success or failure. For example, states need to know how to develop reform strategies that can withstand a downturn in the economy. Health services researchers can help to provide answers to all of these questions.

The research included in this special issue of *Health Services Research* makes an important contribution as an evidence-based resource for state policy development. The articles in the first volume focused on the development of research methods for state-level research. The research in this volume provides evidence about the impact of state efforts to improve Medicaid and SCHIP. The papers demonstrate the type of critical information that state-level research can provide to policymakers considering reforms.

Building off the success of this effort, RWJF has recently launched the *State Health Access Reform Evaluation* (SHARE) program, directed by Lynn Blewett at the University of Minnesota's School of Public Health. SHARE is a \$7 million initiative to fund research of state-level reforms. The program has three objectives: (1) to help develop a coordinated approach to the evaluation of current state health reform efforts; (2) to identify and fill gaps in research; and (3) to organize and disseminate meaningful and user-friendly findings for state policymakers, state agencies, and researchers. This is just one of several efforts the RWJF has made over the past several years to support state reform activity. In addition to AcademyHealth's SCI, the Foundation supports the University of Minnesota's State Health Access Data Assistance Center (SHADAC), designed to provide technical assistance to states in the use state and national data to monitor health insurance coverage, and the National Academy of State Health Policy (NASHP), which has a long-standing reputation of working with states on Medicaid, SCHIP and other coverage initiatives. RWJF also just launched *Consumer Voices for Coverage*, a national program led by Community Catalyst, to support the important role that state-based consumer health advocacy can play in promoting innovative and comprehensive state reform efforts.

Beyond the direct impact of state-level health policy research in helping states learn from one another, findings can also provide important information to policymakers at the federal level. Debates over health care reform have returned to the national agenda for the first time in nearly 15 years. With candidates for the presidency and congress of both parties seriously discussing

health care reform, state-level research can play an important role in shaping the debate—and ultimately reforms, themselves—at the national level. As with welfare reform in the 1990s, state innovations in health care reform have the potential to provide the experience needed to inform national reform strategies.

The increased activity around state-level health care reform provides a set of challenges for different sectors of the health services research community: Researchers need to identify state-level projects with generalizable findings, develop new approaches for conducting state-level research, and lead new data collection activities; Government funders and foundations need to provide financial support for state-level research that encourages the field to tackle the tough questions of what works and why; And academic peer-reviewed journals need to continue to provide space in their publications for state-level research. Moreover, all parties must work in a coordinated fashion to disseminate the results to state and national policymakers in a user-friendly format.

As health care reform discussions take place in states as varied as California, Colorado, and Rhode Island, much is at stake. State policymakers face daunting challenges from rising costs, growing numbers of the uninsured, and unsatisfactory quality of care. Their policy debates underscore the need for health services research to inform decision-making activities. Looking ahead, it is critical that health services researchers be ready to study the states and provide the evidence base that will lead to a continued understanding of reform strategies that might be used by other states or replicated at the national level.

I hope you will read the two-volume Special Issue on “State-Level Health Service Delivery, Access, and Practice: Improving Research and Policy” with a critical eye and let us know what you think. We believe getting state-level health services research into the peer-reviewed literature is an important first step in building an evidenced-based research to inform health policy. I would like to extend a thank you to the senior editors of *Health Services Research* who have worked to make this possible. I would also like to acknowledge Guest Editor Lynn A. Blewett and HSR Senior Associate Editor Romana Hasnain-Wynia for their considerable work in the editorial process.

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