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# Case Study: The Faith Community

## Joining Together to Oppose Medicaid Cuts in Tennessee

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### Background

Created in 1994, TennCare, Tennessee's Medicaid program, was once looked to as a national model for expanding Medicaid coverage. In fact, up until 2002, all uninsured individuals—regardless of their income—were eligible to enroll in TennCare. This included two groups that usually have the hardest time buying insurance: low-income adults and individuals with pre-existing health conditions. At its peak, TennCare covered 1.4 million individuals, and by the late 1990s, only 14 percent of the state's population was uninsured (compared to 25 percent in states like California and Texas).<sup>1</sup>

### The Problem

As of July 2005, the state cut nearly 200,000 beneficiaries from the Medicaid program completely, and it imposed strict benefit limits on 379,000 more enrollees. Under the leadership of democratic Governor Phil Bredeson, Tennessee's most vulnerable residents have been left without anywhere else to go for medical care. Many have been forced to make the ultimate sacrifice—their health and, in some instances, their lives. According to some estimates, TennCare cuts will result in the deaths of as many as 3,311 people over the next 15 years.<sup>2</sup> As of late 2005, the governor had not changed his course of action.

### The Response

Many organizations, regardless of their members' racial and ethnic backgrounds or religious affiliations, have joined together in an effort to convince Governor Bredeson to reverse his Medicaid "reform" proposal. In particular, the faith community is one that has been quite vocal since the governor first announced his plans to restructure TennCare in January 2005. It is one of many communities that refuse to "go down without a fight," initiating and participating in numerous events to bring attention to TennCare cuts. Examples of these activities include:

- rallies at the state capitol in Nashville,
- statewide press events,
- nationwide petitions,
- meetings with state senators and other policymakers in Washington, D. C.,
- speeches about the cuts within their congregations and local community, and
- the longest sit-in at a state capitol in the history of our nation.

Ministers and other religious leaders in Tennessee feel a need for other faith leaders, as well as other community leaders, to speak up and do what they can to prevent future suffering. One such faith leader is Reverend Henry Blaze III, who serves as pastor at Progressive Baptist Church in Nashville and is co-convenor of the TennCare Statewide Coalition. Rev. Blaze has been an outspoken leader on the TennCare issue. Although he had no prior knowledge about health care issues before he began working on TennCare,

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***“One of the high points of the TennCare campaign is that we have forged a coalition that has the potential of transcending issues of race and class.”***

– Rev. Henry Blaze III  
Pastor and Co-Convenor of TennCare Statewide Coalition

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Rev. Blaze was very familiar with coalition building and grassroots organizing. He worked with other local organizations, such as the Tennessee Justice Center, the Tennessee Health Care Campaign, the Nashville Peace and Justice Center, the Tennessee Disability Coalition, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to combine their expertise in health and organizing to build a bigger and stronger movement. His overall role has been to serve as the link between different individuals and organizations that are trying to engage others around this issue.

Rev. Blaze has emphasized that in order to build a successful campaign, organizers must do the following:

- understand the interests that they are trying to bring together;
- identify values that will be the “glue” that holds everyone together;
- find people to get involved, recognizing that they do not necessarily have to know about health, but they need to know how to organize and be passionate about the issue;
- have a vision and framework for the campaign; and
- share the vision and framework with all the individuals and groups involved.

Another faith leader who has been instrumental in the efforts around TennCare is Reverend Dwight Montgomery, who serves as both the Pastor at Annesdale Cherokee Baptist Church in Memphis and the President of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP. After hearing of the governor’s plan to restructure TennCare, Rev. Montgomery immediately wrote him a letter recommending that the state find alternative ways to make up budget shortfalls that would avoid cutting beneficiaries from TennCare. He also met with the governor personally, but neither tactic convinced the governor to change his mind. Rev. Montgomery then began working with other faith-based organizations, such as the African American Muslims, the Rainbow Push Coalition, the Memphis Baptist Ministers Association, and

even labor groups such as the American Federation of State and County Municipal Employees (AFSCME). He was easily able to bring people into the coalition in Memphis by picking up the phone and calling on people individually and asking for their support. Memphis is also unique, since the vast majority of the residents are African American, and

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***“The efforts around TennCare have brought the people of Tennessee together like never before.”***

Rev. Dwight Montgomery  
Pastor, Annesdale Cherokee Baptist Church  
and President, Memphis Chapter NAACP

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many of them were cut from TennCare. Understandably, faith leaders in Memphis had a personal stake in the issue and wanted to get involved for the sake of their community.

By working with other groups on this issue, Rev. Montgomery and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) have been able to take on other health-related causes that they would not have gotten involved in had they not worked on TennCare. The SCLC is beginning to work on issues around mental illness, childhood obesity, infant mortality, and health disparities. They have also gotten a local radio station, WLOK Radio, to play a public service announcement that surveyed listeners on issues around TennCare.

## The Fight Continues

Faith leaders play a unique role in their communities. They have the respect of their peers and congregations, are viewed as leaders in their communities, and have the ability to create change on a larger scale than the average community member. Even with varying levels of health expertise, there is a clear niche that faith leaders can fill in the health care advocacy arena. Getting and staying involved in health issues is essential for creating a more equitable and just society, especially with proposals emerging every day that have a disproportionate impact on racial and ethnic minorities. Regardless of whether or not Governor Bredeson reverses his Medicaid proposal, a new group of powerful health care advocates has been created in the state of Tennessee.

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<sup>1</sup> Trudy Lieberman “Mismanaged Care,” *The Nation*, posted November 22, 2005 (December 12, 2005 issue), available online at [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com), accessed on November 29, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

For more information on Families USA’s Minority Health Initiatives, contact Rea Pañares, Director of Minority Health Initiatives or Briana Webster-Patterson, Program Manager at [minorityhealth@familiesusa.org](mailto:minorityhealth@familiesusa.org) or 202-628-3030.

