

The Commonwealth Fund

Working Toward a High Performance Health System



www.commonwealthfund.org



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The Commonwealth Fund's Mission

The Commonwealth Fund is a private foundation that promotes a high performance health care system providing better access, improved quality, and greater efficiency. The Fund's work focuses particularly on society's most vulnerable, including low-income people, the uninsured, minority Americans, young children, and elderly adults.

The Fund carries out this mandate by supporting independent research on health care issues and making grants to improve health care practice and policy. An international program in health policy is designed to stimulate innovative policies and practices in the United States and other industrialized countries.

At least you have your health. It is a platitude many of us turn to when trying to comfort or reassure our family and friends in times of trouble. But as we all know, good health is not something to be taken for granted. That's why having a strong health care system is so critical—because we all get sick or injured, sometimes seriously, and often without warning.

For far too many Americans, however, affordable access to good-quality health care is not something they can take for granted. It's certainly not because we lack the necessary resources—as a nation, the U.S. spends more on health care than any other. And it's not because we lack capable health care professionals; the U.S. has some of the best care providers to be found anywhere in the world. But all the money and all the best doctors mean little when tens of millions of people don't have adequate health insurance, or any at all; when health care delivery throughout much of the country is fragmented and poorly coordinated; and when incentives for providing efficient, effective care are conspicuously lacking.

Building on its long tradition of scientific inquiry, commitment to social progress, and partnership with those who share our concerns, The Commonwealth Fund works to stimulate change in the nation's health system—to ensure that one day “high performance health care” will be available to each and every American. It is a lofty goal, to be sure. But it is one the Fund believes our nation, with its spirit of ingenuity, its perseverance, and its compassion, is entirely capable of achieving.

The Fund's Work

COMMISSION ON A HIGH PERFORMANCE HEALTH SYSTEM

While the United States spends much more on health care than other industrialized countries, it does not receive comparable value in return. Tens of millions of Americans have no health insurance, or otherwise have difficulty accessing affordable care—including preventive services and treatment for chronic conditions. Moreover, the quality of care—and the efficiency with which it is delivered—varies greatly from physician to physician, from hospital to hospital, and from state to state.

In establishing the Commission on a High Performance Health System in 2005, The Commonwealth Fund's board of directors recognized the need for national leadership to revamp, revitalize, and retool the U.S. health

care system. The Commission's 19 members, a distinguished group of experts and leaders representing every sector of health care, as well as the state and federal policy arena, the business sector, professional societies, and academia, are charged with promoting a high-performing health system that provides all Americans with affordable access to high-quality, safe care while maximizing efficiency in its delivery

and administration. Of particular concern to the Commission are the most vulnerable groups in society, including low-income families, the uninsured, racial and ethnic minorities, the young and the aged, and people in poor health.

The Commission monitors health system performance through its national and state scorecards, and it has issued several analyses of health reform proposals and policy options for controlling costs and increasing value in health care spending. In addition, the Commission engages and informs policymakers through its sponsorship of meetings and public briefings.

*National leadership is needed to **revamp, revitalize, and retool** the U.S. health care system.*

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THE FUTURE OF HEALTH INSURANCE

Some 46 million Americans do not have health insurance, and 25 million more are “underinsured”—meaning their coverage does not provide adequate protection from health care costs. Lack of adequate coverage makes it difficult for people to get the health care they need and burdens them with large medical bills when they do get care.

Believing that universal health coverage is a building block of a high performance health system, The Commonwealth Fund’s Program on the Future of Health Insurance envisions an efficiently run insurance system through which all Americans can obtain comprehensive, affordable coverage. In pursuit of this vision, the program:

- analyzes market- and policy-driven changes in employer-based insurance and public insurance programs for people under age 65, and determines how those changes may affect the number of people covered and the quality of coverage
- documents the consequences of being uninsured or underinsured in terms of access to care, health, personal financial security, and economic productivity
- develops and evaluates strategies to expand and stabilize health coverage, make coverage more affordable, and administer it more efficiently.

One of the program’s major activities is a biennial national survey to track changes and trends in the availability, quality, and affordability of health insurance.

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STATE INNOVATIONS

As “laboratories of innovation,” the states can point the nation to promising approaches for improving the performance of the U.S. health care system.

In the absence of national health reform, states have been experimenting with ways to expand health insurance coverage and access to care, improve quality and efficiency, and promote public health.

*It is clear that the U.S.—the nation with the highest health spending in the world—is **not getting what it pays for.***

The Commonwealth Fund’s State Innovations program aims to improve the performance of our health care system by supporting, stimulating, and spreading states’ strategies to expand access

to care and by promoting high-quality, efficient care, particularly for vulnerable populations. Grants made by the program:

- identify and evaluate promising public and private sector policies
- disseminate lessons learned from state innovations
- evaluate health reform proposals
- respond to states’ needs for technical assistance and analysis.

A prime example of the work undertaken by the program is its comprehensive evaluations of Massachusetts’ pioneering health reform plan.

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MEDICARE’S FUTURE

For more than 40 years, the Medicare program has helped the nation’s elderly and disabled obtain the health care they need while protecting the most vulnerable among them from financial hardship. But Medicare—the nation’s largest payer of health care services—faces many challenges in its fifth decade, as program costs continue to rise and its beneficiaries’ needs evolve.

Through the Program on Medicare's Future, The Commonwealth Fund works to:

- protect vulnerable beneficiaries, by enhancing Medicare's ability to ensure access to care for disabled, low-income, chronically ill, institutionalized, and other vulnerable beneficiaries
- improve the quality and efficiency of the Medicare program, by making traditional Medicare, the new Part D prescription drug benefit, and the private plan option under Medicare Advantage more effective in providing beneficiaries with access to the care they need while maintaining the program's viability
- make Medicare a model for broader health reform, by designing and implementing improvements in Medicare that can be leveraged to improve the efficiency and quality of the health care system as a whole.

Projects now under way include research on improving access to Medicare benefits for low-income beneficiaries, assessing the impact of Part D coverage on utilization and spending, and reforming Medicare payment to encourage more coordinated, effective, and efficient care for beneficiaries and other patients.

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HEALTH CARE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT & EFFICIENCY

The health system scorecard developed by The Commonwealth Fund Commission on a High Performance Health System estimates that between 100,000 and 150,000 deaths could be prevented annually, and up to \$100 billion saved, if the nation as a whole achieved performance benchmarks set by individual states and health care organizations both within the U.S. and abroad. Combined with other evidence of overuse of services, inappropriate care, and waste throughout the health system, it is clear that the U.S.—the nation with the highest health spending in the world—is not getting what it pays for.

The Health Care Quality Improvement and Efficiency Program is rooted in the idea that improvements are most likely to occur when the need for change is understood, measured, and publicly recognized; when providers have the capacity to initiate and sustain change; and when appropriate incentives are in place. The program pursues its goal of improving the quality and efficiency of health care in the United States through three strategies:

- promote the development and widespread adoption of health care quality and efficiency measures
- assess and enhance the capacity of health care organizations to provide better care more efficiently
- promote the development and adoption of payment and incentive models that encourage providers to improve quality and efficiency.

The program is currently supporting a series of projects to better understand the key drivers of performance in the hospital, group practice, physician office, and health plan settings to identify specific practices that can help organizations achieve high performance.

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PATIENT-CENTERED PRIMARY CARE INITIATIVE

As defined by the Institute of Medicine, patient-centered care is “health care that establishes a partnership among practitioners, patients, and their families (when appropriate) to ensure that decisions respect patients’ needs and preferences, and that patients have the education and support they need to make decisions and participate in their own care.” In primary care, such care is best provided in a medical home—a place or network that provides patients with enhanced access to their personal clinician (for example, by making evening or weekend appointments available), coordinates care, and engages in continuous quality improvement.



The goal of the Fund's Patient-Centered Primary Care Initiative, established in 2005, is to improve the quality of primary care by making it more patient- and family-centered. The projects it supports seek to:

- promote the collection of information on patient experiences and the delivery of care to facilitate public reporting and quality improvement
- stimulate adoption of effective practices, models, and tools to make primary care practices patient- and family-centered
- improve policy to encourage patient- and family-centered care in medical homes.

To assess the effectiveness of the patient-centered medical home to improve quality of care and reduce costs, the Fund is committed to supporting evaluations of demonstration projects being launched by commercial health plans as well as public insurance programs.

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HEALTH CARE DISPARITIES

Disparities in health care access and quality of care have been well documented by The Commonwealth Fund and others. While differences in income, insurance status, or medical need play important roles, racial and ethnic disparities persist even after accounting for these factors. Fortunately, there are models of care that hold promise in ameliorating disparities and helping to bring high-performance health care to minority populations.

The Program on Health Care Disparities builds on efforts to improve quality of care overall in the United States, focusing on safety-net hospitals, clinics, and other health care settings that serve large numbers of low-income and minority patients. The program's strategies are to:

- evaluate the performance of safety-net providers to identify opportunities for improvement
- enhance the capacity of safety-net providers to improve performance
- foster incentives and policies that promote better performance of safety-net providers.

Addressing disparities in health and health care also requires trained, dedicated physician leaders who can promote policies and practices that improve minority Americans' access to high-quality care. Since 1996, the Commonwealth Fund/Harvard University Fellowship in Minority Health Policy has played an important role in addressing this need. During the year-long fellowship, physicians undertake intensive study in health policy, public health, and management. Fellows also participate in leadership forums and seminar series conducted by nationally recognized leaders in minority health and public policy.

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CHILD DEVELOPMENT & PREVENTIVE CARE

The success children have in school and later in life depends on their early experiences and the ability of their parents and caretakers to anticipate and meet their developmental needs. Through their regular contact with families, child health care providers have a unique opportunity to foster

positive parenting behaviors, promote optimal development, and initiate early intervention when problems appear imminent. Yet in the United States, the quality of pediatric preventive care—commonly referred to as well-child care—varies greatly. Despite the best efforts of physicians and other child health professionals, many children do not get the care they need.

The Commonwealth Fund’s Child Development and Preventive Care Program supports projects that:

- promote the establishment of standards of care and use of these standards in quality measurement and monitoring
- identify and disseminate models of pediatric practice that enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of care provided
- encourage reforms that remove barriers to quality care and align provider incentives with desired clinical practices.

Building on its sponsorship of initiatives to promote the identification of children with, or at risk for, developmental delay, the program is now engaged in a series of projects to improve systems for linking these children with appropriate services in their communities.

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QUALITY OF CARE FOR FRAIL ELDERS

Today, nursing homes are familiar places for many Americans—either they have family or friends who are in a nursing home, or they live in one themselves. Still, most people dread the thought of living in one. And that shouldn’t be the case.

Many advocates and experts believe that nursing homes need to undergo a “culture change” to transform themselves from hospital-like institutions with rigid schedules and routines into places that accommodate residents’ preferences in addition to their physical needs. In other words, they should to be good places to live as well as good places to work.



The Picker/Commonwealth Fund Program on Quality of Care for Frail Elders is dedicated to advancing the change to “person-centered” long-term care—care delivered in accordance with the needs and desires of the people who live in nursing homes. The projects it sponsors aim to:

- identify, evaluate, and spread effective practices, models, and tools for achieving person-centered care in nursing homes
- promote policy initiatives that support high performance in long-term care.

The Commonwealth Fund recently conducted a national survey of nursing homes to establish a much-needed baseline for measuring and monitoring progress along the road to transformational change. To help nursing homes achieve a higher level of performance, the program supports the national initiative, Advancing Excellence in America’s Nursing Homes. This coalition-based campaign provides technical assistance to nursing homes through 49 state-level networks and tracks the progress of participating homes—which are already demonstrating faster improvement than homes not taking part.

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INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM IN HEALTH POLICY & PRACTICE

As the nation that spends more on health care than any other and yet receives less in return than most, the United States can learn a great deal from the experiences of other countries in providing health insurance coverage and delivering cost-effective, timely, quality health care. Cross-national learning, sharing, and collaborating are what drive The Commonwealth Fund's International Program in Health Policy and Practice. Its mission is to:

- build an international network of health care researchers devoted to policy
- encourage comparative research and collaboration among industrialized nations
- spark creative thinking about health policy through international exchanges.

The United States can learn a great deal from the experiences of other countries in providing health insurance coverage and delivering cost-effective, timely, quality health care.

The program conducts an annual international symposium for ministers of health and experts in health policy, an annual survey of industrialized nations, and the Harkness Fellowship program for promising health care policy researchers and practitioners.

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HOW TO APPLY FOR A GRANT

The Commonwealth Fund requests a letter of inquiry to initiate the grant application process; applicants are strongly encouraged to use the online form provided at www.commonwealthfund.org/resources. All letters will be acknowledged when received. Typically, applicants are advised of the results of an initial staff review within two months.

The Fund makes grants to tax-exempt organizations and public agencies only, supporting innovative approaches to addressing problems within the

nation's health care system. Grants made by each of the Fund's programs (described above) support projects that:

- clarify the scope of serious and neglected problems
- develop, test, and evaluate the impact of new models
- disseminate tools and models of care that have been proven effective
- analyze the impact of policies and trends on well-defined issues.

Visit www.commonwealthfund.org/programsgrants for more information about the Fund's grant process and for a list of recently awarded grants.

HOW TO ACCESS THE FUND'S WORK

The Commonwealth Fund's Web site, www.commonwealthfund.org, contains a wealth of research data, analysis, and practical guidance on health care policy and health system reform. On the site, you can download for free hundreds of publications and a wide variety of multimedia content—from survey data and health system scorecards, to case studies of high-performing health care organizations, to podcast interviews with leading experts in health policy and practice. When you visit, be sure to register for [My Commonwealth Fund](#) to receive e-alerts, post comments, and save content to your personal library for easy reference.

A Brief History of The Commonwealth Fund

In 1918, Anna Harkness—one of the first women to establish a private philanthropy—founded The Commonwealth Fund with the mandate that it should “do something for the welfare of mankind.” Throughout its history and in keeping with its donors' intent, The Commonwealth Fund has sought to be a catalyst for change. Fund-supported efforts over the decades have contributed to the development of the field of child guidance and the emergence of progressive public health departments in the 1920s, the development of new medical schools following World War II, and the launch of the patient-centered care movement in the 1980s, among many other achievements. Since 1995, the Fund has concentrated its efforts on helping to address health care coverage and access issues and on improving the quality and efficiency of health care. It also has used its longstanding international base to stimulate exchanges and collaborations among developed countries on health policy and practices.

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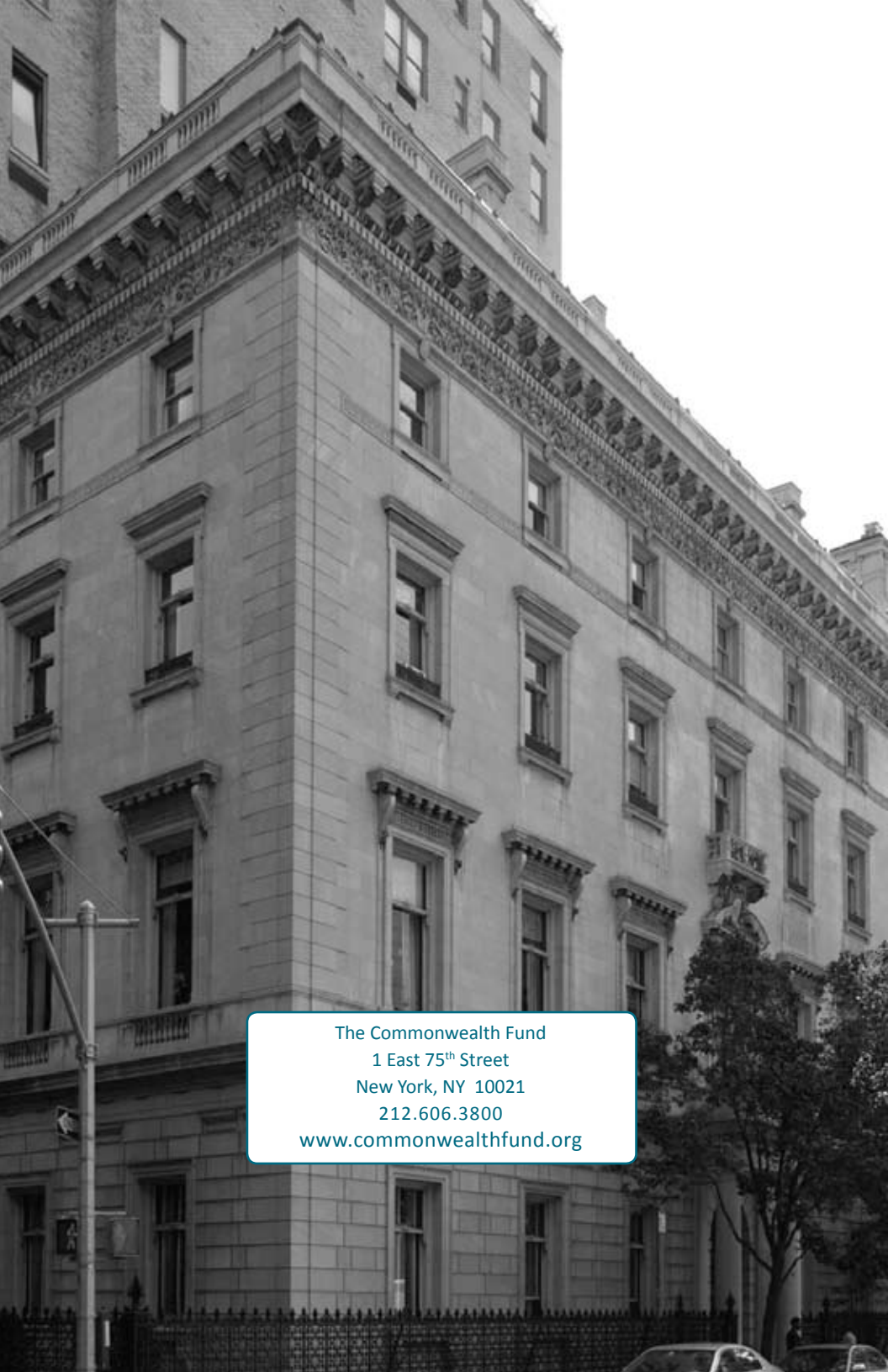
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