

For Immediate Release

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Administration Action on Essential Benefits Package Jeopardizes Promise of Reform, Women's, Consumer Health Expert Warns

Statement of Debra L. Ness, President, National Partnership for Women & Families

"Today's Obama administration announcement on the new essential benefits package is deeply disappointing and jeopardizes the promise of health reform for millions of women and families.

In passing this law, Congress recognized that health plans were not meeting women's basic health care needs, leaving patients at risk for not getting the care they needed and putting families in economic peril when illness struck. That is why lawmakers gave the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) the authority to create a robust essential health benefits package that women could rely on at all ages and stages of life. Americans were counting on the Department to do just that and to ensure that in the future, health insurance plans work for consumers.

That is at the very heart of reform – and the Department let women and families down on that front. While we recognize the need to balance cost and coverage, we are especially disappointed that the "pre-rule bulletin" released today ignores the direction to develop a detailed package that would apply uniformly to plans across the nation. A major concern for women and families is that, by failing to provide specific standards on what the maternity coverage required under the law must include, HHS allows plans to continue offering substandard coverage that fails to meet women's needs.

If essential benefits are left to the states and based on insurance plans sold on the market today, we will miss the opportunity to ensure consumers get the coverage they need and pay for. We also will miss the chance to prohibit discriminatory benefit packages, which was a key advance and one of the measures that made reform so historic and meaningful for women.

Today's announcement leaves millions of women and families to continue facing discrimination in coverage, to pay for plans that leave them badly under-insured, and to continue risking losing their life savings if cancer, a heart attack or other serious illness strikes. It is a grave disappointment."

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The National Partnership for Women & Families is a non-profit, non-partisan advocacy group dedicated to promoting fairness in the workplace, access to quality health care and policies that help women and men meet the dual demands of work and family.