

## Effective HUSKY Outreach Messages

How can community organizations best promote the HUSKY health insurance program? What kind of messages have the most appeal to families? A comprehensive 2001 study sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Covering Kids Program provided some tips on effective outreach messages for Medicaid and State Children's Health Insurance Programs (SCHIP).



### **HUSKY could be for you**

The report was based on extensive national focus groups and surveys of parents of eligible, uninsured children in several states. It also evaluates the effectiveness of advertising campaigns based on the research findings. The major findings were

- The greatest challenge is getting parents to believe the program is for them. Most parents of eligible uninsured children don't know they are eligible, and most say they would sign up if they knew.
- Outreach messages should tap into the parent's desire to be a good parent, reduce stress and have peace of mind.

Because most parents with uninsured children work and tend to equate government programs with welfare only, they tune out messages for programs like HUSKY. Thus, outreach messages should say, in effect, "We're talking to you." Using terms like "working families" and highlighting a specific income eligibility amount can help.

The report also highlighted the importance of tapping into the emotional connections parents have in caring for their children. According to the report, the core message that families respond to is: Low-cost or free coverage helps children get the health care they need. By accessing care for the child, the child will be healthy and successful. This is a smart decision that will reduce the parent's stress about their child and their budget. The end result will be peace of mind for the parent.

For example, one print ad based on the study findings features a photo of a parent and child with the message "You work hard to take care of your kids... now there's help." A radio ad talks about the "hard choices" that parents have to make, such as the choice between paying the phone bill or paying the doctor. Before introducing the SCHIP program, the announcer says, "But there's a choice that can make life easier." The ad encourages parents to call, "because you've got enough to worry about."

### **Message tips**

The findings suggest that effective outreach messages should:

- Highlight a specific income amount (e.g., "many families earning up to \$50,000 a year and even more can get HUSKY health care coverage"). A brief example of a specific figure can help to catch the attention of moderate-income families and help

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them to understand the program can be for them. Adding specifics about family size can distract and confuse parents, but can be appropriate as part of more detailed printed materials, once the parents are interested.

- Use the terms “working families” or “even if you work,” as well as images of working families.
- Outline the comprehensive benefits and services provided by HUSKY.
- Make frequent use of the 1-877-CT-HUSKY number (also a local contact, if appropriate)
- Use the phrase “low-cost or free health care coverage” rather than “free or low-cost”, since emphasizing “free” care may elicit a more skeptical reaction. “Affordable” is a relative term and does not attract as much attention as “low-cost”.
- Use "health coverage" rather than "health insurance", since “coverage” implies the ideas of keeping kids healthy and reducing worry.
- Note that enrollment is easy and can be done by phone.

Outreach messages can persuade by reason (e.g., by citing HUSKY benefits) and motivate by emotion (e.g., by using family images and terms like “peace of mind”).

### **Stigma**

Social stigma is sometimes cited as the most important reason that families do not enroll in programs like HUSKY. However, the survey indicated that most eligible families (75%) believe government health programs based on financial need are a “good thing to help people take care of their families.” Generally, parents were *not* worried about how friends and family would view them if they used Medicaid or SCHIP programs. They felt that people who knew them well would know they are making a good decision for their kids.

The more important stigma worry for families was how they would be treated by the staff at the doctor's office. Many parents were concerned that

- people on Medicaid are treated like second class citizens (43%)
- the medical staff is rude or uncaring (23%), or
- people on Medicaid are made to wait longer (20%).

The report suggests that telling parents that they will get a health care card like any other insurance card may help to alleviate this stigma concern.

Finally, the study found little support for the idea that families don't access programs like HUSKY because they don't value health care coverage. In fact, most families felt getting health care coverage was part of being a good parent, and effective outreach messages can tie into this sentiment.

The 2001 report, “Addressing the Barriers to Covering Kids,” is available from the national Covering Kids and Families project at (202) 338-7227 or at [www.coveringkidsandfamilies.org](http://www.coveringkidsandfamilies.org).