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Health Cuts Hit Hardest in Appalachia

For the past 20 years, I have been working as a health educator in a small, rural, community clinic in southeastern Kentucky. Here in Harlan County, people have been struggling economically for decades. Per capita income is half that of the United States as a whole, with 33 percent of the country's citizens living below the federal poverty level.

Our health care statistics reflect the high poverty rate, with the average life expectancy in Harlan County four years less than the national average. With our high rate of unemployment, about half of the population either has no health insurance or is underinsured. Of those who have health insurance, 26 percent are on Medicaid.

Clover Fork Clinic is a non-profit agency with 31 percent of patients on Medicaid and our future is threatened by Medicaid cuts. For example, government cuts require higher co-pays from our Medicaid patients, and many are simply not able to pay them. Still, the clinic does not refuse health services to these folks. We bear the loss of revenue, but at some point may need to decide whether to refuse services or lose financial viability.

Because Medicaid is so important to a large segment of our population... federal budget cuts may well be a matter of life and death.

What we need is a basic national health insurance plan that would cover everyone regardless of disability or income. Until that happens we need a federal government that treats its most vulnerable citizens justly, which means a government that uses compassionate moral standards to dictate its budget.

Elaine Stoltzfus works at Clover Fork Clinic in Evarts, KY and attends Harlan Mennonite Fellowship.