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**Viewpoints: The Health Care Debate
MomsRising.org Executive Director Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner
Kaiser Family Foundation
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FEMALE SPEAKER: Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, thank you so much for joining us today.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Thank you for having me.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Kristin, I think first, what I would like you to do is to describe what MomsRising is because I think it is not something that some people in our audience will be familiar with.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: MomsRising.org is a relatively new online and on the ground organization that is working to build a more truly family friendly nation. We have looked at what is going on with mothers in America and 82-percent of women in this nation do have children by the time they are 44 years old so it is quite a lot of people, and found that there are policies and programs which are the norm in most other countries in the world that are missing in this nation and it is negatively impacting the women and families in our country in terms of having more women living in poverty, having fewer families with health care coverage, having families having trouble with access to child care, having families who are struggling with getting unequal wages and struggling with a lack of paid family medical leave. All of those issues come together under MomsRising.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Okay. Well then, let us start discussing more in depth for a moment, health care issues. In

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the Motherhood Manifesto, which you co-wrote, the health issue that is featured so prominently is the issue of health care coverage in children. Fill us in.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Well, as many of you know, right now 1 in every 8 children is without any health care coverage at all in our country and this is a profound problem because actually children are the least expensive group of people in our country to cover because they tend to not get sick as much.

Their lack of coverage in young ages can result in lifelong health issues if they are not addressed early and actually significantly negatively impact both the child as they grow older as well as the price on our health care system. So, what MomsRising advocates for is health care for all kids first and then health care for everybody as well.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And to get every child in America covered, is it through the SCHIP program?

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Well, certainly MomsRising has supported an expansion of the SCHIP program to cover more children. Ultimately, there is many, many, many proposals on the table including some of what we just saw proposed in the state of California and has passed in some states which is, actually, a mandatory health insurance coverage which allows everybody to get covered at lower rates because the insurance companies lower the rates in return, I am oversimplifying this

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here but, in return for being able to have more healthy people on their rolls, so their cost should go down.

That is a very big oversimplification but I mention a couple of ideas because we do not think there is one true way yet that is the only way to start covering kids. We are supportive of any enhancement of covering kids right now and we are supportive of exploring the ways that we can cover the most people with these least cost. And what is important to note on that, is that the United States right now spends more per capita on health care than any other nation in the world, but has some of the worst health outcomes.

We rank a low 37th in childhood mortality according to the World's Health Organization and we certainly do not have the highest life spans. So we are not getting much for the health care money we spend and MomsRising is working on making sure that we can spend less money and cover more people because if other countries can do it, we can too.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And organizationally, do you approach these efforts to get every child covered more at the state level than at the federal level?

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Organizationally we simultaneously work at the state and federal level, which is one of the reasons why are working on the health care issue from a number of angles, supporting state coverage and state policies and then also working on, for example what you asked

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about, extended SCHIP at the federal level. So, yes, we have a both end approach.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And I know that it is a new organization and there is not a lot of history there but, in your experience so far, when you are out there trying to organize or to lobby, what do you find to be the most challenging obstacles to get to the point where you want to be at?

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Well, I think there is, to be completely honest, in many of the areas that we work on at the beginning of this interview, we talked a little bit about what MomsRising works on from child care to fair pay to open flexible work and other issues, paid family leave. In comparison, the health care issue, so many people have needed this for so long that sometimes one of the hurdles is getting people to understand that there are truly steps that we can take along the way to get to more coverage.

In many ways, what we have seen is that there is not going to be a single-handed magic wand sweep that is going to fix the health care system, probably in the next month. But, what we can do is work on incremental steps to get there and we can work on many different avenues to get there and so making sure that the public and our membership understands that they do have the power to make a difference and that we are going to be able to be engaged in this for the long haul but bit by bit,

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we can probably get there to better coverage and lower costs both for people and corporations who are paying health care premiums is one of our big struggles and one of the big things that we work on.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And when you talk about taking incremental steps, what are you thinking about? Give me a couple of examples.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Well, first of all, having health care for all kids first would be an incremental step. Things like expanded SCHIP, usually there is many kids who would be left uncovered in most of the expansion models that I have seen. So we are for expanded SCHIP, but, I do not think that is going to solve the problem in and of itself.

And some of these other models that we have looked at, including mandating health insurance for all citizens that was proposed in California, that is not necessarily the be all, end all solution of the health care crisis. But is probably a step along the way.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Is it possible to say yet, where MomsRising.org has seen some success and where you have been stymied?

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Yes. MomsRising has had significant success in many of our areas including paid family leave after the birth of a child, which is actually strangely related to health care. Our members have passed paid family

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leave in Washington State and just last week, in collaboration with many partners, we passed in New Jersey. And it is significant because of over 170 countries in a Harvard-McGill University study; only four did not have some form of paid leave for new mothers, us, Papua New Guinea, Swaziland and Liberia.

And how this connects into the health care crisis is actually quite important. First of all, often times when people do not have paid leave, they have to quit needed jobs because childcare costs are so high and they are making, often times particularly if they have more than one child, less than they would bring in due to the cost of child care which is between \$4,000 and \$10,000 a year per child.

And, at the point where the job is quit, then the job-linked health care is lost and we have parents and kids without health care. So you can see the downward spiral that happens, which links back to what I was saying earlier in the interview about having a baby is a leading cause of a poverty spell. You can see how that can happen.

In addition, when there is not paid family leave, there is actually a 25-percent increase in infant mortality, which is a serious health care issue in this country, that our infant mortality is so high compared to our rate of spending with being the highest spending per capita on health care than any other nation, our infant mortality rates are still very high.

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And, so, we can see that these issues that MomsRising works on, even though paid family leave does not have the word health care in it, actually is a health care issue because it will help people to keep their jobs while they have that time with the new infant, not lose their health care and hopefully allow the infant to have the health start.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Kristin, as we speak in the last part of April 2008, the economy is in trouble and if that continues, how much more difficult does it become to push your agenda, either at the state level or at the federal level? Because some of these things cost a lot of money.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Yes, it cost a lot of money relatively speaking, cost a lot of money in terms of compared to some of the military spending that we do not as much. And so, we have to look at what we are spending money on compared to what we need to spend money on and look at our resources and what we see is an actual increased need for this type of policy and program in times of economic trouble.

What is really interesting about some of the policies and programs that MomsRising works on is that when you run the economic model, yes, you may be spending money out today on a child or on a mother or on a family, but you can take any one of those issues and see that there is a greater money returned to the state and federal government because of less grade repetitions when that child grows up, fewer interactions in the

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future with other government entitlement programs, less interactions with the criminal justice system.

And in a country where the [inaudible] Trust just announced that there are 1 in 100 adults in jail. That is not a insignificant factor and we also see healthier starts and so I think that one of the key things about these issues in looking at economics is noting that in order to build a nation that is able to compete and able to save money later, we need to invest in our families when they are young.

FEMALE SPEAKER: I have one last quick question and that is, given that we are in the middle of a presidential campaign, how is it that you activate your membership? Is it all done virtual, is it all online, is this a good time for MomsRising to try to expand its reach because of all the political activity at the national level?

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Yes. MomsRising is active both online and on the ground and I will just give you a couple examples. We have a MomsVote08 program going on right now, which will heat up more as the presidential season moves on, involving mainly voter registration and reminders of people to vote as well as visibility of the issues.

So, in the last couple of weeks alone, MomsRising members have sent in over 42 thousand letters to the campaigns of the top three presidential candidates, saying that one of the first things that they would like the next president, cause

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one of the three will likely be the next president, to do when they step foot into the oval office is to make sure that they address family needs.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, thank you so much from MomsRising.

KRISTIN ROWE-FINKBEINER: Thank you.

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