



The **Opportunity** Agenda

*Building the National Will  
to Expand Opportunity in America*

**Public Opinion Research**  
*How to Discuss Specific  
Social Justice Issues  
Within A Human Rights  
Framework*

---

## Chapter Two: Health Care

### A. Overview

Advocates should move confidently forward communicating with key audiences about health care as a human right. In the 2007 BRS survey for The Opportunity Agenda, 72% of Americans stated strongly that health care is a human right. The four focus groups on health and health care build on this finding and identify effective language to use when developing communications about health care as a human right.

The four discussions on health and health care took place in four cities, with one focus group in each city: Atlanta on February 18, Chicago on February 19, Santa Monica on February 23, and South San Francisco on February 24. The Chicago and Santa Monica groups were comprised of a combination of Human Rights Champions and Cautious Human Right Supporters – Caucasian men in Chicago and Caucasian women in Santa Monica. The other two groups were held among U.S. Human Rights Supporters – African-American women in Atlanta and Hispanic women in South San Francisco.

The main points from the focus groups include:

#### **Context: How key audiences view a human right to health care**

- Many members of the key audiences view health care as a human right. Health care is seen as a “basic necessity” for survival, as well as needed to fulfill the human right to “pursuit of happiness.”
- While almost all members of these key audiences view emergency medical care as a human right, many also include a range of health services as part of the human right to health care, including preventative care and the availability of contraceptives and abortion. In fact, communicating about reproductive rights in terms of human rights results in some participants becoming more open to seeing abortion as a human right.
- Participants recognize disparities in access to quality health care and consider them human rights violations – violations of equality and freedom from discrimination. Most believe disparities are driven more by economic status or a combination of income, race, and ethnicity rather than race and ethnicity alone. Messages focused solely on racial and ethnic disparities will face more challenges than those that also include economic status.

---

**Barriers: What may hold back key audiences from viewing health care as a human right**

- The most powerful argument against calling health care a human right combines cost, personal responsibility, and the role of government. Taken on their own, participants dismiss each of these individual barriers. However, when combined, they help to dampen enthusiasm for calling health care a human right and raise doubts in some participants' minds. For example, some participants begin to question if the government should *provide* health care for everyone given the cost, as well as the belief by some that certain segments, such as undocumented immigrants, should not get health care benefits because they have broken the rules and have forfeited some of their human rights.

**Messages: Making the case for health care as a human right**

- The two messages that reinforce key audiences' beliefs in health care as a human right equate health care to being as essential to life as food and shelter and connect with individuals' personal fears and emotions around health care.
- Participants' personal feelings of vulnerability when it comes to health care relate to society thinking of health care as a commodity rather than a basic right. Therefore, when presented with a message that rejects thinking of health care as a commodity and embraces health care as a public good, members of the key audiences respond positively. More work needs to be done to develop the specific language around this theme, but these key audiences are ready to start hearing a message about health care as a "public good."
- Messages focusing on international treaties as a justification for upholding health care as a human right are not effective. Messages need to be values-based to connect with key audiences' values and concerns. Most participants see the utility of international treaties once they are explained and discussed, but initially they are seen by many as ineffective and unenforceable.

## **B. Recommended Messages**

Communications on health care as a human right should include three elements: 1) focus on health care being as essential to life as food and shelter; 2) make a connection with individuals' personal fears and emotions by highlighting the failure to fulfill health care as a human right; and 3) define the answer to the problem – in effect, define what you mean by making health care a human right. In this context, begin to talk about health care as a “public good” rather than a commodity.

### **The core message:**

Health care is as essential to a productive and fulfilling life as food and shelter, and in the U.S. no one should have to go without this basic human right.

### **Acknowledge the problem:**

Today, in America, we have a system where millions of people live in fear that one accident or illness will leave them unable to care for themselves or their families because they lack quality health care.

### **Provide a solution:**

It's time we acknowledged that health care is a basic human right for all. This means that the government must organize the health care system to make quality health care services available to everyone. These services include preventive care, reproductive services, mental health, geriatric care, and substance abuse treatment. We must make it clear that health care is not a commodity to be bought and sold, but a human right shared by all. It is time in the United States to uphold the human right to health care because no one should have to go without their basic human rights.

These messages help to reinforce the belief that health care is a human right, begin the conversation about health care as a common good rather than commodity, and help to deflate the impact of counter arguments.