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Response from Redwood Community Health Coalition to Sonoma County Grand Jury Report –
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The 2006 Sonoma County Grand Jury Report on the local health care picture gives official recognition to the far-reaching problems that are plaguing our county as a result of the lack of health insurance and access to care. The report concluded by raising two salient questions: First, who should be responsible for the problems in health care? Second, what should we as a community do?

The Grand Jury asked Redwood Community Health Coalition to respond to its findings and recommendations. RCHC agrees that we need vision and leadership to address this critical issue – an issue that affects each and every one of us. As a democratic society we are collectively responsible for the system of care for our children, families, and elders. We have elected officials to provide leadership and direction for the greater good of our community. The time is now to urge our leaders to join other socially responsible counties and states in addressing the unmet health care needs in Sonoma County by entering into a serious investigation of universal coverage for every person.

To be clear, by “universal” we mean that every individual in Sonoma County has a medical home and is comprehensively covered for their medical needs including: preventative care, primary care, specialty care, diagnostic services, and hospitalization. Before dismissing universal coverage as politically or fiscally impossible, consider several important yet underreported facts.

- **Every person in Sonoma County is touched by the problems in our healthcare “system,” regardless of income** – although access to care is most difficult for those who are low income. When any of this county’s estimated 86,000 uninsured people – who are your neighbors, your co-workers, your child’s classmates – become sick or injured, they still need access to doctors and hospitals. As self-interested citizens, we don’t want untreated, contagious people coming to school and infecting others or not coming to work and lowering productivity. As a civilized society, we do not want to deny people needed medical care.
- **Local doctors and hospitals treat the insured and uninsured alike; the cost of their care is incurred regardless of their status.** Ultimately, we all pay for uninsured health care services through the spiraling cost of our insurance premiums and with our tax dollars. The cost of uncompensated care for Sonoma County hospitals alone rose from \$900,000 in 2004 to more than \$2 million in 2005, according to the Grand Jury report. In addition, Sonoma County’s community health centers provided more than \$4.8 million in uncompensated medical care in 2005. Another report from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research estimates that we pay \$240 per person per year for uncompensated care in our county. This



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same report extrapolated that if healthcare coverage were simply extended to everyone in Sonoma County, spending would amount to \$233 per person – about 3 percent *less*. In the meantime, many families go broke trying to pay healthcare bills, the primary factor in half of all personal bankruptcies.

- **Public support for universal health care is already there.** Opinion polls consistently reveal that 59% of Californians support a universal health insurance system, and 53% say they are willing to pay more in taxes or premiums to extend health insurance to more people. A research project conducted by the California Endowment published in May 2006 identified even stronger support (71%) for comprehensive public coverage among business and civic leaders as well as private individuals *when given the opportunity to compare costs and consider trade-offs with other possible solutions.*
- **“Universal care” does not have to be strictly publicly funded or government run.** It can and does take on many different forms. There are statewide solutions such as Senate Bill 840, introduced by Sen. Sheila Kuehl, D-Santa Monica, which seeks to replace private insurance plans with a single-payer system with the state government buying health services for everyone. Massachusetts is establishing a statewide universal plan with hybrid public-private elements. Both represent possible ways to achieve universal coverage, although these go beyond the scope of what can be initiated now at the local, county level. For example, San Francisco’s new Health Access Plan provides universal *access* yet is not universal health *insurance* because coverage is not portable beyond city and county limits. Other California counties including Alameda and Santa Cruz have also created their own distinct systems of universal care.

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Sonoma County is known for innovative and progressive thinking. However, when it comes to health care we are leaving thousands of people without access to basic services. As a just and equitable society we must challenge ourselves to find a better way. We cannot afford the costs, either financially or in human suffering, of waiting for the federal or state governments to find a solution to a problem that affects us so dearly in our community. We must lead the way by creating our own.

Our response to the Grand Jury is: We must all take responsibility. Let us be inspired by the efforts of our neighboring counties and launch a Sonoma County initiative to create a system of



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care that will bear the costs equitably, ensure sustainability, and meet the growing need for medical services for all people.

Submitted by Mary Szecsey, Executive Director of West County Health Centers, Inc. and chair of the Sonoma County Committee of Redwood Community Health Coalition.