FORMER PRESIDENTS, SURGEONS GENERAL
AND HEALTH SECRETARIES HEAD EFFORT ON UNINSURED

New Census Figures Show Staggering Number of Americans Without Health Insurance –
‘Cover the Uninsured Week’ to Increase Activism, Focus on Solutions

Washington, DC, Sept. 30, 2003 – In conjunction with today’s release of new government data on the number of uninsured Americans, a group of former U.S. Surgeons General and former U.S. Secretaries of Health and Human Services from Republican and Democratic administrations pledged their support for a nationwide effort led by former Presidents Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter to make certain that all Americans have affordable health care coverage.

The group pledged support for Cover the Uninsured Week 2004, which promises to be the largest mobilization effort in history around this issue. This national initiative aims to make the issue of the uninsured – and solutions to the problem – a central part of national discussions through public education and community events. The former Presidents will serve as honorary co-chairs of the Week, which is being planned for May 10-16, 2004, by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and a diverse group of national organizations.

“The unacceptably high number of uninsured Americans, a majority of them in working families, means that Americans from every walk of life and point of view can and must work very hard in the coming year to guarantee that all Americans have the health care coverage they need,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A., president and CEO of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “The moral leadership of Presidents Ford and Carter and many of the nation’s former top health officials from many administrations demonstrates wide support for making certain that all Americans have high-quality and affordable health care coverage.”

In an open letter released today, nine prominent top health officials from several past administrations called on the nation to ensure all individuals have access to health care coverage. Their open letter states, “We are united in our commitment to helping the millions of Americans who do not have health insurance coverage. We call on the American public to join in nonpartisan discussions about this issue and help find solutions to this problem, which affects every American, whether insured or not.”

Signatories to the letter include Donna E. Shalala; David Satcher, M.D.; Joycelyn Elders, M.D.; Louis W. Sullivan, M.D.; C. Everett Koop, M.D.; Joseph Califano, Jr.; Richard S. Schweiker; Julius Richmond, M.D.; and F. David Matthews. (Letter is attached).

Cover the Uninsured Week 2004 will build on the unprecedented success of Cover the Uninsured Week 2003. Held in March, the event brought together more than 800 national and local organizations to sponsor nearly 900 public events in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Cover the Uninsured Week 2004 will commence with a national kick-off event, followed by more than 1,000 events held by community groups from coast to coast. Next year’s effort will also feature physicians, nurses and other health professionals who donate a portion of their time during the Week to care for the uninsured.

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The nation’s faith community is expected to play a leading role in the effort, and will make its collective voice heard in declaring health care coverage a common community value according to the teachings of diverse faith traditions. Many major faith groups are working together to plan national and local activities.

Among the more than 1,000 planned events are community health fairs, educational forums, workshops for small business owners who are seeking or trying to maintain health coverage for their employees, and volunteer efforts by physicians and others. Many of these events will offer medical screenings for the uninsured and other members of the community, as well as opportunities to enroll eligible children and adults in the State Children’s Health Insurance Program and Medicaid. Cover the Uninsured Week 2004 will be bolstered by an advertising campaign that will be seen and heard across the nation as well as by an interactive Web site that will encourage thousands of Americans to take action on the issue.

“In addition to speaking out about the need to provide health coverage for all Americans, we will create opportunities for those who want to do something now to help the uninsured, ” said Lavizzo-Mourey. “This issue affects all Americans. Virtually every insured American is one pink slip or one new job away from being uninsured. We know all too well that the uninsured are often forced to delay care and suffer with illness. Tragically, the uninsured sometimes die sooner as a result.”

In addition to The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Cover the Uninsured Week 2003 was sponsored by diverse national organizations including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, AFL-CIO, Healthcare Leadership Council, Service Employees International Union, American Medical Association, American Nurses Association, Health Insurance Association of America, Families USA, Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, American Hospital Association, Federation of American Hospitals, Catholic Health Association of the United States, AARP, United Way of America, The California Endowment, and W.K. Kellogg Foundation. More than 800 local organizations also participated. The 2004 effort will be funded primarily by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation; additional support is expected from other philanthropies and corporate sponsors. In 2003, 22 funders supported the effort.

For more information, log on to www.CoverTheUninsuredWeek.org.

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is the nation’s largest philanthropy dedicated exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans.
An Open Letter to the American People:

We have dedicated our lives to improving the health of Americans from all walks of life and have had the privilege of serving our country by shaping national health policies that have benefited hundreds of millions of people. Even though presidents who adhere to different political philosophies appointed us, we are united in our commitment to helping the millions of Americans who do not have health insurance coverage. We believe that we must solve this problem that has harmed the health of our nation’s people for too long.

Not having health insurance takes a terrible toll on the physical and financial well being of the uninsured, most of whom are in working families that cannot afford health insurance and are not eligible for coverage through public programs.

As the Institute of Medicine has found, uninsured Americans live sicker and die younger because they are forced to put off life-saving care.

As former officials responsible for the nation’s health, we recognize the urgent need to raise awareness about the plight of the uninsured and seek solutions to the growing number of uninsured Americans through a constructive, bipartisan discussion that welcomes the views of every American.

While we believe that education and discussion are the keys to making progress, we also know that there is much that we can do to help the uninsured today. We urge Americans who want to help to join in efforts to enroll eligible individuals in public programs, educate businesses and their employees on how they can get and keep health coverage and support health professionals and organizations that want to offer volunteer care.

We call on all Americans to get involved in solving this problem, which affects every American, whether insured or not. Join us in supporting and participating in Cover the Uninsured Week, which will take place in communities from coast to coast from May 10 to 16, 2004. Log on to www.CovertheUninsuredWeek.org to find out how you can get involved.

F. David Matthews, Ph.D.
Secretary; Health, Education, and Welfare – Ford Administration

Julius Richmond, M.D.
Surgeon General – Carter Administration

Joseph Califano, Jr.
Secretary; Health, Education, and Welfare – Carter Administration

C. Everett Koop, M.D.
Surgeon General – Reagan Administration

Richard S. Schweiker
Secretary; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – Reagan Administration

Louis W. Sullivan, M.D., D.Sc.
Secretary; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – George H.W. Bush Administration

Joycelyn Elders, M.D.
Surgeon General – Clinton Administration

David Satcher, M.D., Ph.D.
Surgeon General – Clinton Administration

Donna E. Shalala, Ph.D.
Secretary; Department of Health and Human Services – Clinton Administration