

## CLARIFYING THE DEFICIT REDUCTION ACT

Even though the 2005 Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) hasn't yet hit the streets in Los Angeles County, Maternal and Child Health Access (MCHA) is already hearing concerns from other counties. This federal law requires that most U.S. citizens show proof of citizenship and identity one time only when applying for or renewing full-scope Medi-Cal benefits, explains Lynn Kersey, MA, MPH, the founder and executive director of MCHA. The act purports to save the government money by weeding out people who are receiving the benefits even though they aren't eligible. According to a Congressional Oversight Committee, however, for every \$100 spent by federal taxpayers to implement the new requirements in six states, only 14 cents in Medicaid savings can be documented.

Pregnant women requesting full scope Medi-Cal will be required to show proof of citizenship if they are not in an exempt category. But, Kersey stresses, all pregnant women, regardless of citizenship status, are eligible to apply for pregnancy-related Medi-Cal and will then not be subject to the Deficit Reduction Act. Nothing will change for non-citizens, who will continue to be eligible for Medi-Cal for pregnancy-related conditions, emergencies and a few other purposes. Women who already have full scope Medi-Cal shouldn't have to renew it during their pregnancy, but if they do, they should either present their citizenship and identity documentation during their renewal process or tell the county they are trying to obtain it.

While it's good news that prenatal care itself should be unaffected for both citizens and non-citizens, it's regrettable that the act can be easily misinterpreted, Kersey says. "Unfortunately, its very existence will have a chilling effect on women trying to access prenatal care and other services." The DRA could go into effect by July or August 2008, in L.A. County, and sooner in other counties statewide.

Currently in L.A. County, 90 percent of women receive prenatal care in the first trimester. "The health of newborns and mothers has improved because of financial access to prenatal care through Medi-Cal. It would be tragic if misinterpretation of this new law contributes to women unnecessarily accessing prenatal care late or not at all," she says.

In response to the pending implementation of the act, MCHA is already



Photo: Beth Hezhoif

Lynn Kersey, MA, MPH, the founder and executive director of Maternal and Child Health Access

people into a broader training program, thanks to timely and generous support from L.A. Care Health Plan.

"Caregivers and advocates can give the provider the right information, or they can call Maternal and Child Health Access to do it," Kersey says.

Caregivers and advocates should check out **Maternal and Child Health Access'** Web site at: [www.mchaccess.org/health\\_coverage.htm](http://www.mchaccess.org/health_coverage.htm)

"Deficit Reduction Act (DRA) update—January 2008" for accurate information regarding the interpretation of the act.

If an organization is misinterpreting the law, advocates can contact:

- **Health Consumer Center of Los Angeles** at (800) 896-3203 (multiple languages spoken)
- **Maternal and Child Health Access** at (213) 749-4261.