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ABC News didn't give complete sharing ministry story

PEORIA, IL – ABC World News' recognition of health care sharing ministries on Monday night's (9/28/09) broadcast was a welcome beginning, but the limited time available did not allow giving the complete story, potentially giving viewers inaccurate impressions about this approach to health care.

The story warned, for instance, of potential abuses or failure to provide for medical needs of members.

Samaritan members who commented on ABC News' Web site told another story, though.

"We've been part of Samaritan the past 5 years and have never had a problem with our bills being paid (including one pregnancy, a trip to the ER, etc.)," wrote Shawn Degenhart, a Samaritan member who lives in Metamora, Ill., on the ABC site. "We can go to any doctor, hospital or ER we choose and receive whatever care that is available to us. The 'faith' element comes in on relying on other believers to fulfill the biblical mandate of sharing one another's burdens. ... More of our medical bills have been paid than when we were with a traditional insurance company."

A member who posted a comment as Tracyface4jc2 called Samaritan "an amazing organization that has many safeguards in place to prevent the abuse of funds."

"I have had to use the program twice now and my needs were FULLY met," she wrote. "With the discounts I was able to garner for being self-pay we were completely covered... Once for a little over \$5000 and another time for a little over \$9000... All using the doctors of MY choice at the hospital of MY choice."

Mandea211 wrote, "We had private health insurance for 20+ years and honestly, there were times our bills were not paid according to what was implied, and we were left with excessive medical bills. We have been members of Samaritan for nearly 10 years, and have (submitted needs). Each (need) has been met by other share families. Samaritan has truly been a blessing to our family. Would gladly answer any "real" concerns/questions anyone may have...as a member of Samaritan but not an employee."

"Our members are excited about what we do," said James Lansberry, the Samaritan officer interviewed in the ABC story. "We're providing a viable, unique service and helping people with tens of millions of dollars of health care expenses every year."

(For those who would like to view the interview in its entirety and decide for themselves the importance of what was not included, the full video can be viewed at <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/faith-based-health-care-evangelical-christians/story?id=8696127> or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OYMNtzxfwo>.)

Lansberry, who is vice president of Samaritan and president of the Alliance for Health Care Sharing Ministries, further said that “the segment was much too short to really capture what we do as faith-based, non-insurance alternatives.”

“The news segment certainly does not paint us in the best light, right up to and including the truncating—obviously a mid-sentence cut if you watch it—of my last statement about our methods for protecting our members and ensuring they understand the difference between health care sharing and health insurance before joining,” Lansberry says.

Lansberry, who is also head of Samaritan’s Public Policy Department, made these further points:

- The health care ministries in the Alliance are already succeeding in providing charitable health care help. “Samaritan does not turn away families based on health history and provides a sponsorship program to help families who cannot afford the very small share of \$285 per month—even less for couples and singles,” Lansberry said.
- The ABC story did not include anything from a lengthy exchange between Harris and Lansberry about the potential impact of health reform legislation on sharing ministries. “I was surprised that none of that footage made it into the segment,” Lansberry said. “We remain concerned about how those who are paying their bills without using health insurance will be affected by the proposed legislation, and are working to protect our members as the legislation is completed.”
- Lansberry also clarified how sharing ministries work for high-cost incidents, a topic of discussion on the Internet. “People should know that each of the ministries has shared single needs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and is sharing millions of dollars in needs each month,” he said.
- The story mentioned a sharing ministry accused of embezzlement, but that charge was made and settled more than five years ago. The three health care sharing ministries operating today have controls in place to prevent such a thing from happening again. “Samaritan Ministries, which was featured in the ABC report, has an elected board that oversees the budget and sets salaries for officers. All of the ministries in the Alliance have an external audit performed annually,” Lansberry said.
- “As it was pointed out in the story, there are no guarantees of payment, but that is part of the faith-based nature of what we do, and why only people of faith are interested in sharing ministries,” Lansberry said. In addition, reports abound of “guaranteed” insurers failing to cover something a policy holder thought was covered. “Because we’re not concerned with policies and contracts, our members share burdens in accordance with Galatians 6:2,” Lansberry said. “We are less concerned about the medical care you choose than about how we can help you.” He said that no consumer complaints have been filed in any state against Samaritan Ministries that he’s aware of.

Instead, Samaritan has file drawers full of letters thanking them for the ministry they're providing. "No one takes the time to send a thank you note to an insurance company," Lansberry said. "Again, we don't believe this approach to health care is for everyone, but it is one option that we'd like to see protected."

Samaritan Ministries is a health care needs-sharing organization founded in 1994. It includes more than 13,600 member households in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and around the world. For more information about SMI, the Alliance of Health Care Sharing Ministries, or to contact James Lansberry, call 1-888-726-4276, send e-mail to jlansberry@smchcn.net or info@healthcaresharing.org, or view www.samaritanministries.org.

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