

# Health care focus of Congressional immigration hearing

By DOUG GROSS, The Associated Press  
Aug 15, 2006 12:00 PM (2 days ago)

**DALTON, Ga. -**

Supporters of the U.S. House version of [immigration](#) reform blamed illegal immigrants Tuesday for putting undue strain on the nation's [health care](#) system.

At a congressional field hearing, politicians and health care officials said more must be done to require people seeking government health benefits to prove they are in the country legally.

"Fewer poor Americans get Medicaid because illegal aliens get Medicaid," said Rep. Charlie Norwood, R-Ga., a member of the House Committee on [Energy](#) and Commerce. "It's that simple."

Critics of the plan, however, argued that problems with the nation's health system go far beyond immigration, and said illegal immigrants are being unfairly used as scapegoats.

"Immigrants use less health care services than American citizens; immigrants use emergency rooms less than nonimmigrants," said Rep. Hilda Solis, of California, the lone Congressional Democrat at the hearing organized by House Republicans. "The real problem with our health system is not immigrants, but the fact the system is broken."

Congress remains deadlocked between House and Senate versions of immigration reform. House Republicans say the Senate plan does not go far enough, and object to provisions including one that would allow some illegal immigrants now in the U.S. to work toward becoming citizens.

Jim Gardner Jr., CEO of Northeast [Georgia](#) Health System in Gainesville, told the panel that the Hispanic population in Hall County has grown from 1 percent in 1980 to more than 24 percent in 2004, and that 33 percent of that population is uninsured.

He said the hospital regularly sees illegal immigrant patients with chronic health problems who were encouraged by family members to come to the U.S. because loopholes in the law make it easy to get government funded care.

"Better care, at no expense, is becoming a magnet to draw chronically sick people to our already broken health care funding system," he said.

But Alison Siskin, an immigration specialist with the Congressional Research Service, said studies have been unclear as to whether the presence of illegal immigrants has much impact on government health care.

"The studies are all over the place," she said. "There are not studies that have shown rampant abuse."

Norwood told Siskin he was "disappointed" in her testimony and that he planned to complain to her superiors at the federal office.

The hearing was the second held in Georgia in two days.

Monday's hearing in Gainesville focused on illegal immigration's impact on jobs and the economy.

Critics have dismissed the field hearings as little more than political posturing by Republicans hoping to maintain their hold on [Congress](#) in this year's elections.

"The dog and pony show should stop," said Jerry Gonzalez, president of Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials. "Congress needs to go back to work, roll up their sleeves and do the hard work the American people expect."

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