



In Defense of Medicaid: A Personal and Policy Imperative

By Riisa Rawlins, CEO, Community Health Commission of Missouri

I am Riisa Rawlins—a proud mother of three and the Chief Executive Officer of the Community Health Commission of Missouri.

I've navigated our health care system from multiple vantage points—without insurance, with Medicaid, and with comprehensive employer-sponsored coverage. I've felt the sting of medical debt while working three jobs, attending college full-time, and raising a young child. I've made impossible choices between rent and a prescription, groceries and a specialist visit.

I also know the relief that comes with having health coverage—the clarity and calm that comes from knowing your child's asthma flare-up won't force you into debt or homelessness. That peace of mind allowed me to focus on school, build a career, and support my family with dignity. Not everyone gets that chance.

The Community Health Commission exists to eliminate health disparities—but what does that actually mean?

It means making sure every person—regardless of income, geography, or circumstance—can get the care they need, when and where they need it, in ways that are safe, respectful, and affordable.

My lived experience navigating our system is the reason I stand with families, caregivers, and advocates across Missouri and the country urging lawmakers to protect Medicaid. I do so not only because I've lived it—but because the evidence is clear:

- **A strong Medicaid system keeps our workforce healthy and our businesses open.** It strengthens rural hospitals and community clinics, ensuring access where no other options exist.
- **Medicaid sustains our health care safety net.** I've relied on public health centers myself. And now, in my current role, I see daily how critical Medicaid is to the survival of public health departments, federally qualified health centers (FQHCs), behavioral health providers—including those on the front lines of the opioid crisis—and hospital emergency rooms. These institutions serve as vital access points for entire communities, and many are already stretched to the brink.
- **Major federal cuts to Medicaid would devastate Missouri's health system and budget.** Our state would be forced to choose between raising taxes or reducing care—both of which disproportionately harm working families.
- **Medicaid cuts mean coverage terminations—leaving millions just one illness or injury away from financial ruin.**



Because this isn't just about policy. It's about people.

Medicaid isn't charity—it's an essential part of our healthcare infrastructure. It supports families with children, older adults, people with disabilities, and hardworking Missourians who earn too much to qualify for other programs, but too little to afford private coverage. It is not perfect, but it is essential. It is a promise that health is a right—not a privilege.

Congress must keep that promise.

I urge our policymakers to remember who they serve. To listen not only to statistics and spreadsheets—but to the voices of those whose lives depend on their decisions. To lead with compassion, courage, and the conviction that health care should be accessible to all of us—not just some of us.

We cannot afford to roll back progress. We cannot gamble with people's lives.

Our future depends on it.

