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DATELINE: MANHATTAN BEACH

As part of a renewed push for state health care legislation, a pair of Southland organizations released a survey today that found the large number of uninsured Latinos in California was a top priority of Latin-American community leaders.

The Latino Issues Forum -- a nonprofit public policy and advocacy institute -- and the Latino-owned MAYA marketing agency performed an online survey of more than 100 Latin-American community leaders. Roughly 70 percent of those who responded identified uninsured Latinos as a serious and pressing concern.

According to estimates from the Employee Benefit Research Institute's March 2007 survey, 37.5 percent of the U.S. Hispanic population is uninsured, as compared to 21.8 percent of blacks and 12.6 percent of whites. In California, about one-third of Hispanics have no insurance, according to the groups.

Inability to afford insurance, immigration status and lack of understanding of the U.S. health care system were cited by respondents to the MAYA/LIF poll as the top reasons for the growing number of uninsured Latinos.

The increase in the cost of employer-based health insurance was more than double the state's inflation rate in 2007, while the cost of premiums in California rose 8.3 percent, outstripping the national cost increase of 6.1 percent, according to the National Opinion Research Center's California Employer Health Benefits Survey of 2007.

"In order to address the needs of the Latino community, we have to have affordable, culturally competent and linguistically accessible access for our folks," said Sarah Mercer, senior program manager for Latino Issues Forum.

While announcing the survey results today, Mercer called for the championing of what she described as the vulnerable elements of the Latino community: children and undocumented workers.

"If we're not advocating for them, nobody else is going to be. And if they don't have access, I think we all suffer. Our system itself suffers," Mercer said.

To that end, Mercer said the results of the survey will be presented to policy makers in California.

Last year's bid by Gov. Schwarzenegger and the state Legislature to overhaul California's health care system stalled when the Health Care Security and Cost Reduction Act was rejected by the Senate Health Committee.

"Even though it was a very exciting year ... we ended up losing," Mercer said. "I think the Latino community was the community that lost among all others. We lost the most."

Sabrina Lockhart, spokeswoman for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, said that even though the Senate missed a "golden opportunity to make California a health care leader," the governor remained committed to fixing the system.

"The problems of our broken health care system haven't gone away," she said.

LIF/MAYA offered a series of recommendations for policies aimed at improving insurance coverage of Latinos, including:

- requiring all health care plans to cover preventive screenings, disease management and health assistance programs;
- developing a bilingual media campaign about prevalent illnesses among Latinos and prevention strategies;
- collecting demographic data to ensure health plans deliver quality and equitable health care;
- investing in local communities to provide active living environments; and
- developing clear guidelines for the public to measure the quality of care they receive.