



**For Immediate Release**

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## **Georgia Watch Awarded Funding to Work with Southwest Georgia Hospitals on Better Billing and Collections Practices**

Atlanta, GA (March 10, 2021) – Georgia Watch announced today that it has been awarded a \$190,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to work with community groups and local healthcare providers to address local needs around medical billing and debt in Southwest Georgia. The organization will be working with Georgians for a Healthy Future and SOWEGA Rising, with support from Community Catalyst, a leading non-profit national health advocacy organization dedicated to advancing a movement for health equity and justice.

“We are honored to be selected by Community Catalyst to participate in the Community Benefit and Economic Stability Project and are grateful to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for their generous support of this important work,” said Liz Coyle, executive director of Georgia Watch. “We will leverage the policy expertise and relationships Georgians for a Healthy Future has in the region, as well as the local knowledge and community trust SOWEGA Rising has as a minority-led, grassroots organization based in Southwest Georgia.”

Medical debt has been a serious problem for people across the country that has [only worsened during COVID-19](#). Thirty-seven percent of people who report having medical debt or medical bill problems use up all their savings to pay their bills, and [40 percent](#) have received a lower credit rating as a result of their medical debt. Additionally, [26 percent](#) reported they have been unable to pay for basic necessities such as food, heat and housing.

“Medical debt burdens Georgians significantly, stemming in part from the state's large uninsured population,” said Laura Colbert, executive director of Georgians for a Healthy Future. “As of 2019, Georgia had the third highest percentage of uninsured people in the nation, with at least [13.4% of Georgians lacking health insurance](#) compared to 9.2% of adult Americans nationwide. Southwest Georgia, in particular, has some of the highest health costs in the country due primarily to the lack of competition among providers and insurers. This level of consolidation leaves consumers with little choice about where to seek



care, incentivizes predatory medical billing practices, and increases health insurance premiums.”

“The medical debt burden disproportionately impacts black and brown people due to unfair and discriminatory barriers to health coverage and economic security,” noted Sherrell Byrd, chair of SOWEGA Rising. “Particularly in rural Georgia, you will see the highest rates of medical bills which drives up insurance costs, creating barriers to people who have to choose between paying bills and seeking necessary medical care. With this funding, we can find solutions that will restore healthcare dignity for many people living in Southwest Georgia.”

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### **About Georgia Watch**

Founded in 2002, Georgia Watch is a statewide nonprofit organization advocating for consumers and working to give Georgians a voice in critical public policy forums. We educate the state’s consumers on the healthcare, energy, civil justice and financial issues that impact the quality of their lives. In all that we do, we work to ensure equitable outcomes and justice for Georgia consumers. For more information, visit [www.georgiawatch.org](http://www.georgiawatch.org).

### **About Georgians for a Healthy Future**

Georgians for a Healthy Future (GHF) is a non-partisan, non-profit consumer health advocacy and policy organization with a mission to build and mobilize a unified voice, vision, and leadership to achieve a healthy future for all Georgians. GHF advocates for a day when all Georgians have equitable, affordable, quality health care so they can live healthy lives and contribute to the health of their communities. GHF does its work through coalition building and mobilization, consumer education and mobilization, strategic communications, and public policy advocacy. More information available at [healthyfuturega.org](http://healthyfuturega.org).

### **About SOWEGA Rising**

SOWEGA Rising is a non-profit, non-partisan organization based in Southwest Georgia, comprised of member citizens and organizations which support the organization’s mission. As a minority-led and grassroots organization, SOWEGA Rising’s goal is to facilitate Southwest Georgia’s rise from the bottom of the state to the top of the list of quality-of-life metrics by empowering individuals and revitalizing communities through rural revitalization,



community organizing, education, coalition-building and advocacy in the areas of human and civil rights and social justice, and by increasing citizen engagement in the democratic processes of our state. SOWEGA Rising mobilizes people and resources to improve the well-being, quality of life and political power of marginalized Southwest Georgians. For more information, visit [www.sowegarising.org](http://www.sowegarising.org).