



## ITUP's Sunset, and the Work Ahead

Insure the Uninsured Project (ITUP) officially closed its doors this summer after nearly 30 years. For those of us who've worked in California health policy, the news carried weight. ITUP wasn't a flashy organization, but it was a steady hand advancing California's remarkable gains in health care coverage.

In 1996 a gutsy former legislative consultant, Lucien Wulsin, established a small non-profit organization dedicated to one primary goal—get everybody in the state health coverage. At the time health care reform was considered political quicksand. National reform efforts had collapsed. California was wrestling with high uninsured rates and heated battles over immigration and social services. Many advocates were demoralized. The strategy was to bring together people who shared the goal of universal coverage—from the health industry, business sector, consumer advocates, and policy makers. Once together, the approach was to maintain an unrelenting commitment to reach the objective of insurance for everyone. The first ITUP conference in 1995 gathered about 100 people. It was informal, but it attracted an eager and engaged audience. What followed was nearly three decades of convenings, policy papers, and quiet persistence. ITUP didn't lobby or grandstand. Instead, it created space for insurers, providers, labor, business, and government to sit down and talk. Think of it as a kitchen table for health policy — a place where different views could be surfaced, common ground identified, and new ideas could take shape. Over time, the annual conference grew to include up to 700 participants from across California's health ecosystem including advocates, health care providers and payers, leaders from local government and community-based organizations, enrollers, and students.

Each year ITUP convened up to 10 regional health collaboratives. Participants shared data, stories, and ideas about what was working and what wasn't in their communities. ITUP brought those insights to state leaders, helping shape policies grounded in real-world experience. In turn, ITUP brought updates from state and federal policy debates to local leaders, helping local leaders identify opportunities to weigh in on key issues.

Annual ITUP conference agendas reflected priorities raised in regional convenings, giving local voices a platform on the statewide stage. Conference attendees connected with peers across regions, sparking partnerships that often lasted well beyond the event. Breakout sessions focused on timely, real-world issues, such as improving mental health access for justice-involved patients and understanding how elections shape health policy and access to coverage.

Each year, ITUP produced 10 to 20 publications, including issue briefs, toolkits, and regional fact sheets. These materials translated complex policy topics into plain language, helping stakeholders make sense of fast-changing health reforms. The regional fact sheets gave local partners data they could use to push for change in their own communities. Many used ITUP's analysis to advocate with elected officials, secure funding, or strengthen grant applications. Over time, these publications became trusted resources, not just for understanding emerging policy issues, but for driving local action across California.

Each year ITUP also hosted several policy forums. Expert speakers and facilitated discussions engaged and educated stakeholders on emerging policies affecting access to coverage and care. In 2025, policy forum topics included artificial intelligence in health care, mental health

care for the justice- involved population, and the health policy implications of upcoming elections.

Lastly, ITUP managed a multi-disciplinary and diverse stakeholder network of over 5,000 individuals. People within and outside of California looked to ITUP for insights on California's culture of coverage and its efforts to advance equitable access to health care for all.

Over the years, ITUP's approaches helped lay the foundation for major reforms involving coverage expansion for children, undocumented Californians, and low-income families. ITUP brought stakeholders together around Medicaid waivers that later became building blocks for the Affordable Care Act. When the ACA passed, ITUP supported the hard work of implementation, tackling everything from enrollment challenges to behavioral health integration. During the pandemic, ITUP quickly created forums on telehealth to inform state action at a time of crisis.

By the time ITUP closed this July, the uninsured rate in California had dropped to a historic low 4.5%. That's no small feat in a state as large and diverse as ours. But health care progress is like patching a roof — if you stop tending to it, leaks return. Costs remain high. Gaps in access persist. And new threats loom in Washington, including proposals that could strip coverage from millions and make deep cuts to the safety net.

That's why ITUP's legacy still matters. Its role wasn't to "win" a policy fight, but to build the relationships and trust that make change possible. The annual ITUP conferences and regional workgroups connected thousands of stakeholders who otherwise might never have crossed paths. Its publications provided clear-eyed analysis without partisanship. And its alumni — staff, partners, and the young professionals it mentored — continue the work in organizations across California.

So what comes next? ITUP may be gone, but the responsibility it carried doesn't disappear. California needs conveners who bridge divides, policymakers who listen, and advocates who keep equity at the center. The coalition of the willing that ITUP sparked must carry on — by protecting past coverage gains, closing the gaps that remain, and holding firm to the belief that health care is a right, not a privilege.

Lucien often reminded us: don't let the perfect be the enemy of the good. That spirit is what made ITUP effective for so long. As we face new challenges, it's also what will keep California moving forward.

The ITUP Board of Directors acknowledges with gratitude the thousands of people within its broad network whose participation and engagement were key to ITUP's success. We appreciate the strong vision of founding executive director, Lucien Wulsin, as well as the talented leadership of subsequent executive directors Deborah Kelch, Katie Heidorn, and Crispin Delgado. The work of ITUP would have been impossible without the dedicated efforts of staff over the decades. Finally, we acknowledge with appreciation financial support from several long-time core funders: the California Wellness Foundation, The California Endowment, the California Health Care Foundation and the Blue Shield of California Foundation, as well as time-limited grants from many other local state and national funders, without which our work would have been impossible.