

Healthcare Reform Can't Wait



**By Majority Leader
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Since 2000, the health care premiums of American families have more than doubled, while wages have stood still. Last year alone, employees' out-of-pocket healthcare costs jumped by more than 10%. None of us can wait for reform—not the working families being squeezed more and more by healthcare costs each year, and not the 45 million Americans with no coverage at all.

In recent months, Democrats have often been told that the economic crisis means that we can't afford to be bold, that

confronting the recession will take all of the resources we have. But here's what isn't being said often enough or loud enough: Reforming the American healthcare system will have a profound, positive impact on the American economy.

Today, America spends \$2.5 trillion a year on health care, 17.6% of our GDP. Without a change, that number is slated to rise to \$4.4 trillion in less than a decade. And as the recent CBO projections have shown us, our country is facing unprecedented levels of near- and long-term debt and deficits. It is impossible to pay down our debt, reduce our spending, and get a handle on our economy without tackling healthcare costs.

Those costs are crippling American businesses. Our companies spend more than twice as much on health care as their foreign counterparts, putting them at a severe disadvantage against competitors around the globe. The CEO of Starbucks once testified before Congress that

their firm spent more on health care than on coffee; the Big Three automakers tell us that an extra \$1,500 is tacked onto the price of every car they sell, just to cover health care costs. Small businesses are also under intense pressure—their health insurance costs have increased by 129% since 2000. Healthcare reform means a level playing field for our employers and more jobs for American workers.

Businesses aren't the only ones feeling the squeeze. With 61% of Americans getting coverage through their employers, lost jobs mean lost healthcare. Every time the unemployment rate ticks up one percent, it means that 2.4 million more people lose their employer-sponsored insurance. And in this recession, 14,000 Americans are losing their coverage every day.

Even those of us lucky enough to have steady jobs and good benefits are paying more, for less, every year. Beneficiary costs are going up, employers are scaling back coverage, and,

in some cases, current insurance law means that workers are just one disease away from disaster. Lifetime caps, annual caps, and exclusions for pre-existing conditions mean that even Americans with insurance can find themselves unprotected in a time of sickness.

America is home to the best practitioners in the world, the greatest technology in the world, the most advanced research and development in the world—but it is also saddled with a system in desperate need of reform.

Over the coming weeks and months, Congress will debate just what that reform will look like. Recent history has shown us that this argument can be partisan, rancorous, and full of distortions. That is why it is so important for Congress to be clear with the American people about its intentions.

Democrats want to build upon the current system of employer-sponsored care, so that people who like what they have now can keep their current policies. We also want

to preserve an element so key to American life: choice. We want a system that guarantees patients their choice of insurance coverage and their choice of doctors.

But we also recognize that, for the almost one in five of us without insurance, the current system isn't working at all. Without insurance, all the healthcare choice in the world is meaningless. So Democrats also support policies that will strengthen private and public coverage and make affordable healthcare available to all.

Finally, without serious work on our part, the cost of healthcare will continue to strain family budgets—and the combined costs of healthcare and our entitlement programs will swallow our national budget in a sea of red ink. We need to lower healthcare costs with a focus on prevention, up-to-date information technology, and national research on the best, most cost-effective treatments. We also have to rein in the growing costs of Medicare and Medicaid—a

task that will require, from both parties, political will and a readiness to make hard choices.

President Obama has indeed laid out an ambitious agenda for our nation. But these times call for decisive action. Attentive to our constituents' needs, and mindful of the urgency of these hard times, we Democrats are united in our commitment to health reform that will embrace these clear goals: decreasing costs, increasing coverage, improving quality, and preserving choice. And we look forward to working with Republicans and independents to make reform a reality.

