

Health Care Reform is Needed (Star Ledger)

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As Congress debates health care reform, it is important for me to know of the experiences of those on the front lines. In June, I invited Central New Jersey primary care providers, community health center leaders and patient advocates to Washington for a discussion on health care.

On Monday, I hosted a roundtable discussion at the Henry J. Austin Health Center in Trenton with organizations interested in health care reform, ranging from hospitals to physicians and nurses to small businesses to biotechnology companies.

Those at the front lines of health care told me of the difficulties they currently face. For example, a pediatrician shared her story of primary care providers struggling to see more patients while receiving lower payments. A community health center president told me that more of her patients are uninsured and are struggling with higher health care costs.

These discussions confirmed for me the urgent need to reform our health care system.

This is a crucial moment in the quest for universal health care. It has been 15 years since Congress last seriously discussed reforming our broken health care system. In that time, the system has become more expensive, covers fewer people, and is in greater need of reform. As the husband of a primary care physician, I have heard stories about hard-working New Jersey families who lack health insurance, cannot afford the medical care they urgently need, and feel they are one illness or one accident away from bankruptcy.

Health care spending is projected to reach \$8,160 per person this year, an amount sufficient to provide excellent care for everyone. While we spend almost twice as much per person as other industrialized nations, the United States has the highest number of medically preventable deaths of 19 industrial countries and a higher infant mortality than Japan, Germany, and Great Britain. Without health reform, businesses' costs will continue to increase, families' out-of-pocket costs will rise, and American workers will not receive the health care they need.

In the health care debate, it could be easy to get distracted by economic theories or obscure accounting techniques. This debate, however, should be about making Americans healthy and giving American families security in knowing they have access to affordable care.

This week, the House of Representatives took an important first step. As a member of the House Committee on Education and Labor, I supported the America's Affordable Health Choice Act, legislation with the intention of extending coverage to all Americans, improving the quality of care, expanding preventative care, and reducing the health care costs that Americans pay.

This reform proposal builds on our existing system, so that if people are happy with the insurance they have, they can keep it. While the legislation passed our committee, we have much work to do to secure health care reform.

As I work to strengthen legislation as it moves through the process, I want to highlight two key features of reform: creating a public health insurance plan and increasing the resources devoted to primary care.

A public health insurance plan should be included in the legislation in order to lower costs and improve health care delivery. A public plan would lower costs by increasing competition, as Americans in many regions of the country only have one or two insurance options available. A single insurance company controls more than half the insurance market in 16 states, while in

New Jersey the top two companies control almost 60 percent of the commercial market. The public plan would serve as a benchmark to encourage private plans to focus on providing value. A public plan also would provide a way to inject best practices for delivering higher-quality health care, such as encouraging integrated medical care and increasing primary care.

Primary care also must be a focus in health reform. Primary care providers, including doctors, advanced practice nurses, and physician assistants, are the front line of health care and have the ability to integrate a patient's care. I am pleased that the proposed House health reform plan seeks to improve primary care by increasing training for the primary care workforce, expanding the National Health Service Corps to encourage physicians to practice in underserved communities, and enlarging community health centers that provide primary care and preventive care to all persons of all ages.

We cannot accept the status quo. I believe this year we will reform our broken health care system, but I know this will not be easy. Since Teddy Roosevelt was president, Congress has tried to pass universal health reform. However, with presidential leadership, a supportive Congress, and an American public that understands what is at stake, the table is set for historic reform. As participants at the primary care discussion in Washington and the roundtable in Trenton told me, we must fix our health care system to keep individuals healthy, prevent diseases, and provide health security for all Americans.