



1150 Connecticut Avenue, NW
Suite 1020
Washington, DC 20036
t: 877.223.7002
f: 202.223.0311
www.americasagenda.com

Let's Reset the Tone In the Health Care Debate

By Richard Gephardt and Tommy Thompson

Far too often in our nation's policy-making process, we allow ourselves to get caught up in the divisive aspects of issues rather than focusing on how we can work together to achieve a historic, bipartisan result. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the debate over health-care reform set to enter a critical phase when lawmakers return to Washington next week.

Regardless of the divisive tone, we cannot afford to get sidetracked as the facts make clear the urgency of acting this year. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than one out of seven Americans do not have health insurance. In the absence of meaningful near-term reform, the Urban Institute estimates that an additional 20 million Americans could be without health insurance by 2019. Every day that goes by without meaningful reform creates more uncertainty and risk.

Skyrocketing health-care costs, a key driver of the current debate, make families more vulnerable and place an unprecedented burden on many of our nation's businesses. Premiums alone for employer-sponsored health insurance in the United States have been rising four times faster, on average, than workers' earnings since 2000.

After weeks of dialogue, idea-sharing and spirited debate – it is time to formally reset the tone and move forward with a bipartisan reform package that brings down costs, increases access and affordability, promotes American ingenuity and innovation and, most importantly, empowers individuals to prevent chronic disease that accounts for 75 percent of our nation's health expenditures and make better health choices.

Congress and the Obama administration should take the lead by pursuing three equally important steps:

First, host a bi-partisan White House summit similar to the one that President Obama hosted earlier this year on the economy. Leaders in both parties have noted, the areas of broad agreement far outweigh areas of disagreement. Providing high-quality, affordable health-care to every American is inherently a non-partisan issue. So is the need to increase coverage, prevent chronic disease and promote innovation. By bringing together Democrats and Republicans, along with labor unions, business and other stakeholders, the president would be sending a strong message that his administration is committed to reaching a meaningful solution this year.

As members of *America's Agenda* – a bipartisan organization of businesses, labor unions and government leaders – we recently conducted listening sessions around the country where we heard loud and clear of the economic toll rising health care costs. Americans with and without insurance are often, understandably, confused and looking for straightforward, practical solutions that directly address the root challenges facing our nation's ailing health-care system. We cannot let partisan differences stand in the way of constructive conversation and dialogue.

Second, focus on common-ground ideas that have taken a backseat to the more divisive elements of the debate. Remarkably, for all the talk about the need to address skyrocketing health-care costs, we have done little to help Americans understand how existing reform proposals will help prevent chronic disease, a proven cost driver and perhaps the most fundamental concern for an increasingly elderly population. Investing in health innovation – from effective use of health information technology to funding breakthrough research and initiatives that will help cure our planet’s most pressing medical challenges – should also be a centerpiece of the public dialogue around cost containment.

A recent survey commissioned by *America’s Agenda* found a statistic on which Republicans and Democrats broadly agree. Seventy-five percent of voters support reform that will give their primary care or family doctor the support of a coordinated team of allied professionals like nurse practitioners, nutritionists and preventive care specialists. These health professionals would provide continuing care between doctor visits, increase the physician’s productivity, decrease medical errors, and reduce health costs over the long run.

Third, explore ways that health-care reform can create jobs and drive new investment in our nation’s economy. In an expanded system, we will need more doctors, nurses, technicians and researchers. With chronic disease prevention as a cornerstone, we will also be driving growth and opportunities in other key fields, such as sustainable agriculture and nutrition.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics estimates that since the recession began in December 2007 employment in the health care sector has grown by 513,000 jobs. By recognizing the potential of better health-care as a growth engine, we will be enabling much-needed activity across multiple sectors of our nation’s economy.

Rarely do lawmakers have an unprecedented opportunity to unite behind an issue that affects every American, regardless of gender, age, income or party affiliation. As the president and Members of Congress return to Washington, it is time to set aside the partisan rhetoric and reach a meaningful agreement that brings down cost, provides a boost to our nation’s economy, increases coverage and protects overall quality of care.

Put simply, the American people deserve no less.