

Re-Creating The Health Care System

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By way of introduction, both of us served as Governors for eight years: Minnesota and Washington. As Governors, we created MinnesotaCare and the Basic Health Plan in our states—programs to provide health care for hard working, decent people whose employers did not or could not pay for it. But that was ten years ago. Now these plans are being significantly altered, our economy has changed, and our political climate has eroded.

It is not just Minnesota and Washington. State after state is dismantling similar programs. In Tennessee alone this year--to balance the state budget—over 191,000 adults will be cut from the TennCare program. It will also cut benefits for hundreds of thousands of others because it cannot afford the \$8.7 billion program. Missouri intends to completely dismantle its Medicaid program by 2008. Now, instead of working together to build programs, hundreds of thousands of people are without health insurance with precious few places to turn. This is not inconsequential—one of every five Americans under 65 has no health insurance.

Couple this with changes in the economy and it spells trouble. Jobs are being outsourced to other countries largely due to costs such as health care. This leaves even more people without health insurance, because under the current system when you lose your job, you lose your health care.

Add to this other changes on the health care horizon. More employers are introducing the new health savings accounts that pass more costs along to the employee. The federal government proposes sweeping makeovers of Medicaid and Medicare. We face the most profound changes in our health care system in 40 years. Consider the looming retirement of the Baby Boom generation which will profoundly impact our society by adding pressure to both the workforce which pays for Medicare and our already underfunded retirement programs.

All these changes introduce more instability into our nation than any other time during our lifetimes. Instability is not healthy for a democratic society.

And, just as we face these thunderous changes, we have devolved into a rancorous political climate that does not serve us as citizens. Nor does it serve the health of our nation.

When we retired as governors, a mere 10 years ago, our society respected an honest exchange of ideas to solve a problem. We welcomed a diversity of ideas, albeit often grudgingly. But now we have become a society that approaches its problems by shouting at each other, that is laden with spin, and that considers honest disagreement an act of betrayal. This shakes the very foundation of a democracy.

So, it is time we, the people, speak with the one tool we have—our voices. Public office should be an office beholden to the people they serve, not to special interests that flood the campaign coffers. We need to launch a national dialog, create a vision that works for us, and tell our representatives: This is the health care system we want.

We cannot look solely to elected officials to solve our health care problems. Sadly, they have placed “pork” ahead of legitimate concerns such as health care. We, as citizens, must create the vision, which we start in this series—starting here today. We can create a system that serves our people, our businesses, our economy, our communities and our country.

It is possible. But, as Governors, we know that every time we try to talk about fixing our health care system someone yells “Socialized Medicine.” People have been yelling “socialized medicine” since the 1920s. This is simply a dodge. A means to derail an honest examination of our health care system. So, let us take a look at this so-called system.

First, our health care system is inadequate. Prevention should be first; the foundation; the heart; the goal. Not the stepchild it is now. We have an “after the fact” health plan—one that says we will think about your leg only after you have broken it. It is one that says, don not worry about diet, exercise and smoking, we can fix it. In 1932, the Committee on the Cost of Medical Care lamented that our health care costs were high because we had a disease-based rather than preventive system. This disease-based system persists today and our health care costs continue to rise.

You will see in the upcoming pieces the real price we pay for not investing in the health of our people. We will also see visions and ideas for a better future by people who know that change is possible as is a better future.

Second, as Governors with direct experience, we think our real problem now is lack of leadership. Our leaders are not advocating for prevention that could flatten, if not lower our costs. Our leaders are not creating a vision of a sustainable health care system. Most importantly, our leaders are not fostering a civil, civic dialog necessary for the health of our nation.

Democracy is founded on the free flow of ideas and discussion—something that is sorely lacking today. Democracy is not about winning at all costs. Winning at all costs creates disorder and disorder breeds instability. Instability is not an asset of democracy.

Real leadership invites ideas. Leadership matters. But, it is hard to solve a problem when public dialog is mean-spirited and a “my way or the highway” approach. This does not foster public discussion and, in fact, undermines the very notion of a democracy.

So we need a major national discussion, starting here today—outside the Washington DC Beltway. We must start that dialog, build a vision and layout an expectation for our leadership.

Third, the health of our nation counts. Currently, our health care is becoming increasingly unaffordable. It is a drag on our economy, burdens our businesses and our families, and undermines our international competitiveness. We live in a global economy that ties us together.

Being the lone major industrial nation that does not cover health care for all our people does not serve us as a society. Morally and economically, this is true.

We must focus on affordable health care coverage for all of us. This is what we will see on these pages over the next nine weeks—an open and honest exchange of ideas about one of our nation's most pressing issues—a sustainable health care system.

The goal here is to set in motion a thoughtful, intelligent dialogue that, hopefully, will lead to the development of a health care system that provides everyone with a proper level of care at an affordable price.

We must ask ourselves—how can we cover all our people? What are different ways we can pay for it? Clearly, we must all participate. In addition, any system we create must first focus on issues of wellness. Prevention is infinitely less expensive than faulty outcomes. Toward this end, your input is most valuable. That is why, at our Town Hall meeting on December 5th and at each Town Hall Meeting, around the country, your ideas will become part of the total discussion and part of our report and that report will be made public.

Our hope also is to change the tone of our national discourse so that we can welcome input and reward thoughtfulness.

We are both honored to be part of this effort.

We are not the only ones who believe this. Please be sure and read what a leading national business leader has to say as well.

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