

San Francisco Chronicle

A new momentum for health care reform

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Thursday, December 11, 2008

The prospects for comprehensive health reform seemed dim for the foreseeable future when the California legislature failed last year to pass the universal coverage plan sponsored by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and former Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez.

But today there is renewed hope as a national movement for health care reform is emerging in Washington, D.C. President-elect Barack Obama, congressional leaders and a growing number of business and provider groups have acknowledged the urgency and importance of providing health coverage to everyone, despite the alarming economic problems facing the country.

Obama has stated repeatedly that we can't solve our economic problems without reforming the health care system. Why? Because by guaranteeing that every person has health care coverage, we can improve health-care quality and reduce costs over the long term. Preventive care, better management of chronic disease and expanded use of health information technology are all made easier if everyone has coverage.

So how do we seize this opportunity, and not repeat the failure of the past?

Health-care leaders must commit to supporting comprehensive reform even, if it runs counter to their business models. That's why we joined the New American Foundation in launching a coalition of health care CEOs who recognize that business as usual is not sustainable, and who are willing to take risks to achieve universal coverage with lower long-term costs.

Health CEOs for Health Reform embraces these three principles:

- 1) Health reform is a priority, and should not be postponed.
- 2) Meaningful reform includes universal access to affordable, quality health insurance and transforming the way we deliver care.
- 3) All health-care stakeholders must accept changes to their business model in order to create a system that will better serve everyone.

That means:

- Health plans must give up the right to pick and choose their customers based on how healthy they are, and instead compete on cost, quality and service.
- Hospitals and physicians must be accountable for the

quality and affordability of the care they deliver. They should be paid based on quality outcomes, not on the number of services they provide.

We do not underestimate the size of the challenge that transforming our health care system requires. There are many competing interests at the table, and the economic crisis is too severe to believe this will be an easy task. But the dynamic has changed dramatically in the past few months.

Consider:

The apparent choice of former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle as secretary of health and human services, with authority over health policy in the White House, suggests there will be strong and coordinated leadership for the Obama administration's health reform efforts.

Several bold health reform legislation proposals have already been announced. Senate Finance Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., released a comprehensive blueprint last month. Sens. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Robert Bennett, R-Utah, have offered a bipartisan universal coverage plan, and Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., also is expected to release a reform proposal soon.

Groups that have resisted change in the past now have embraced universal coverage and have joined broad-based coalitions to work on reform. For example, the two largest health plan trade associations, America's Health Insurance Plans and the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association, both have endorsed mandatory universal coverage for the first time last month. Earlier, the National Federation of Independent Business and the Business Roundtable created an alliance with the Service Employees International Union and AARP to pursue comprehensive reform.

While the proposals have different elements, they converge on the fundamental structure. Like the Schwarzenegger plan, they would require everyone to be covered by health insurance, with the cost shared broadly among individuals, business and government.

This new momentum for health-care reform can succeed, but it will require the key players in the health care system to take risks and make compromises to be part of the solution. Members of Health CEOs for Health Reform have made this commitment - and we invite others to join us.

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