

Extra Feature Story

Fixing the Health Care System Tops President's Agenda,

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America is home to some of the best doctors and medical facilities in the world, but the high cost of care and the inequity of health insurance must be fixed, according to President Obama, if the nation is to return to economic health.

As part of his presidential campaign last year, Barack Obama promised to tackle health care reform, a key issue for Democrats who have been trying to fix the problem of millions of Americans being uninsured as far back as Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency but most recently while President Bill Clinton was in office.

President Obama is trying to build a coalition of doctors, hospitals, insurance companies and politicians to support his plan. However, there is much resistance, as change may affect the profits of insurance companies, medicine manufacturers and other powerful groups.

The president's plan argues for an alternative to private medical insurance (supporters call it a "public plan," opponents call it a "government-run plan"), evidence-based medical analysis and streamlining of medical practices as cost-saving tactics.

"Having some alternative to a private insurance monopoly is, I think, a good idea, will offer some choice and will offer some competition," Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius told the NewsHour

At an ABC News-sponsored town-hall meeting this month, President Obama admitted that health care is often about emotional and personal choices saying if "it's my family member, if it's my wife, if it's my children, if it's my grandmother, I always want them to get the very best care," but added "There's a whole bunch of care that's being provided that every study, that every bit of evidence that we have indicates may not be making us healthier."

Many in the United States are without any safety net

Health insurance is one of the central issues in the debate. Most Americans have some form of health plan in which they, or the company they work for, pay a certain amount each month, and in return, the insurance program pays for some portion of their doctor appointments and medicine, and provides a safety net in case of a major illness or accident.

But there are currently 45.7 million people without insurance, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. In addition, the economic downturn is causing job losses that strip insurance from 14,000 Americans a day, according to the White House.

With the cost of health care rising and an overall aging population many speculate that that number will rise and costs could spike in coming years.

President Obama has named health care reform as his No. 1 domestic policy focus, and he is trying to push a bill through Congress that could cover all Americans (called universal health care) or at least a governmental option for those without health care.

Many types of health care

Most Americans receive some sort of health care coverage through their employers. Health insurance is a "benefit" that companies use to entice workers. Employees often pay to cover their spouses and children as well.

The president and Congress recently renewed the 1997 bill that guarantees free or low-cost health insurance for uninsured children, known as CHIP or Children's Health Insurance Program.

Medicaid, an insurance program funded jointly by the federal and state governments, is available for individuals and families with limited incomes or resources. However, many people make too much money to qualify, but they still cannot find affordable health care.

For those without care, hospital emergency rooms become doctor's offices since they legally cannot turn people away.

Universal health care, the concept of coverage for all eligible residents, is a hotly contested topic in the United States but is available in many other wealthy industrial nations in the world.

Many attempts at reform

Amy Walters, editor-in-chief of the Hotline, told the NewsHour that "people like the idea of covering those who are uninsured" but legislators on both sides of the aisle are wary of reforms as they remember the bitter and divisive fight over health care 15 years ago.

President Clinton also named health care reform as a top domestic issue and appointed his wife, now Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to head up the health care task force but reform never came as the bill could not move through Congress.

Senate negotiators working with President Obama said this week they were closing in on a \$1 trillion, 10-year health care plan that could be fully funded by tax increases and Medicare cuts.

President Obama has said it is imperative that the bill he signs be fully funded.

-- Written by Lizzy Berryman for NewsHour Extra

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