



US Senator Russ Feingold

Invited Editorial

Starting the health care debate in Congress

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When I ask Wisconsinites what issues Congress should be working on, I often get the same answer: health care. I hear it everywhere I go, a desperate refrain from people deeply frustrated with our health care system, and increasingly angered by Congress' inaction. There are an estimated 45 million Americans who are uninsured, and countless more who are underinsured.¹ The skyrocketing costs of health care are crippling businesses, hurting families, and frustrating the medical community, and it's time to do something about it.

When it comes to health care reform, Congress doesn't seem to know where to start, but the American people do—the way to start is by finally debating this issue, making the tough decisions, hammering out the details, and, at long last, getting something done. That's why I have joined Republican Senator Lindsey Graham of South Carolina to introduce a bill to force Congress to take up health care reform legislation. Our bill does not prejudge what particular health care reform measure should be debated—it simply requires Congress to act,

and to ensure coverage for at least 95% of Americans. This bipartisan effort is not rooted in a shared approach to how to reform health care. Senator Graham and I may not always agree on the best way to bring more Americans the health care coverage they need, but we can agree that while Congress waits, families are going into bankruptcy to pay their health care bills, businesses are sinking under the weight of skyrocketing health care costs, and Americans are going without care, sometimes fatally, because they are uninsured. Congress may see waiting as an option, but the American people do not.

To put the current system in perspective, the United States spends \$5670 per capita annually on health care, twice as much as any other industrialized country.² Despite this spending we are not healthier than other countries, and we still have tens of millions of Americans who lack insurance, and countless others who remain underinsured. Our expensive, inefficient health care system takes a staggering toll on American families and businesses. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, premiums for family coverage increased by 59% from 2000 to 2004, compared to inflation growth of 9.7% and wage growth of 12.3%. These skyrocketing costs, which far outpace wage growth, have left

many families struggling to pay for health care.

The burden is just as devastating on businesses. On average, the cost to an employer of a family comprehensive coverage premium is \$800 per month, not significantly lower than the monthly minimum wage rate of \$893 per month.³ With costs going up every year, employers often feel they have no choice but to shift much of the cost of health care to their employees, stop providing health benefits to employees, or eliminate employee positions altogether.

The burden on both families and businesses is made worse by the 45 million Americans—including 8 million children—who live without any health insurance coverage at all.¹ For these Americans, mostly working families, a health problem can quickly become a crisis; without insurance, they can be forced to spend their entire savings when a family member falls ill. And because they lack coverage, these Americans usually wait before seeking treatment and do not receive preventive health care, leading to costlier treatment when they are finally forced to seek care. As they risk their own health, they also inadvertently drive up the cost of their care, often receiving care through hospitals, where the care is most expensive to give. These are costs that must be shouldered by everyone else in the system, from those with insurance

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to the federal government, which spends about \$34 billion a year on uncompensated care.⁵

Wisconsin physicians are also burdened by the current health care system. Doctors are expected to provide high quality care and to “do no harm,” but providing the best care has become increasingly difficult to manage. High patient volume, physician shortages, and low payments from the government and insurance companies make it difficult for some physicians to stay in business and provide good care. Our health care system needs systemic change in order for doctors to have the resources they need to provide good care.

Our current health care system is failing consumers and medical professionals alike. With so many Americans demanding changes in the way we provide health care in this country, inaction is simply inexcusable. Senator Graham and I are taking a bipartisan approach that doesn’t dictate what changes should be made, but does demand action from Congress. Only by forcing action will Congress finally make the tough choices that health care reform requires, and that the American people rightly demand.

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