

Health insurance reform is essential for our families, our businesses, and our country.

Our families are being strained by skyrocketing premiums. If we do nothing, the average Maryland family can expect to spend nearly \$25,000 per year on health care premiums by 2016, up from \$12,000 now. Across America, families are dealing with the same out-of-control costs: this decade, premiums have risen three times faster than wages, meaning that health care eats up a bigger and bigger share of your budget every year.

Our businesses are also struggling under the burden of an outdated system. Starbucks spends more on health care than coffee; GM spends more on health care than steel. American companies pay twice as much for health care as their foreign competitors—a serious handicap that can send jobs overseas. And small businesses continue to struggle to cover their workers; their premiums going up by 129% in this decade.

Finally, our country will face a dire fiscal future without reform. In 2006, health care costs ate up 16% of our economy. If we do nothing, by 2025, health care will take up a quarter of our economy—and within this century, one out of every two dollars spent in America will eventually be going to health care.

Health care reform has been on the national agenda since the days of Teddy Roosevelt—but today, we are closer than ever to achieving the goal. All five congressional committees with jurisdiction have come forward with bills, and we are now in the middle of an extensive public debate about various proposals. While some issues remain under discussion, there are many fundamental ideas that most agree need to be part of a final reform bill.

First, reform will build on the current system of employer-sponsored health care. It adds to that system greater peace of mind for workers: if they lose or change jobs, they will still be guaranteed affordable, high-quality insurance through a national health insurance exchange where private plans will compete for their business.

Second, reform will provide security and stability for the middle class. We will protect families from medical bankruptcy and limit out-of-pocket costs. We will also end insurance companies'

denial of coverage for those with pre-existing conditions - everything from cancer and diabetes to pregnancy and asthma. And we will eliminate caps, so that no insurance company can tell a patient that they have gotten too sick for the coverage they paid for.

Third, reform will bring coverage to America's uninsured. Not only will a healthier country provide an economic boost; broader coverage will end the "hidden tax" of about \$1,100 in each family's premium that goes to subsidize the care of the uninsured.

Fourth, if you have Medicare, your health care will not change and reforms will strengthen the program by ending the prescription drug "donut hole" that arbitrarily cuts off many seniors' prescription drug coverage, eliminating cost-sharing for preventative care and enhancing access to your doctors.

Fifth and finally, the insurance exchange helps small business owners get lower rates on insurance. By leveraging the purchasing power that now is only available to their larger competitors, small businesses will find it easier to cover their employees.

From those who have every been denied coverage for a pre-existing condition, or have seen their health care costs eat up more of their budgets every year, and everyone who has struggled with the inefficiencies and inequities of our current health care system, these commonsense reforms are long overdue.