

WASHINGTON - Congressman Hoyer issued the following statement today in observance of "Cover the Uninsured Week," May 10th through 16th. In Maryland, 1,123,000 people in 2001 did not have health insurance for six months or more; roughly one in every five Marylanders.

"Access to affordable health care and insurance coverage is a serious problem in our nation. Unfortunately, since President Bush took office, we have seen drug and health care costs rise but insurance coverage and federal support for quality health care programs drop.

"Health insurance is an important investment for this country and for our state. Many people forego necessary or preventative medical treatment because they lack insurance, and this can have deadly and expensive consequences. For example, the hours and wages lost due to decreased productivity or missed workdays cost the U.S. economy billions of dollars each year.

"Democrats are offering an effective plan to expand health care coverage by introducing three health care bills this week. The FamilyCare Act of 2004, the Medicare Early Access Act of 2004 and the Small Business Health Insurance Promotion Act. Together, these three bills could provide health insurance for over half of the total number of uninsured Americans. These bills are based on proven programs and aim to ensure that three growing groups of the uninsured -- the low-income, retirees, and small business and self-employed Americans -- have access to affordable health coverage. On the other hand, the Republican proposals being considered in the House or Representatives this week would only help insure 2.1 million new people, and their proposals would do more harm than good to existing coverage.

"In 2001 and 2002, nearly 4 million Americans lost their health insurance coverage, bringing the total number of uninsured to 43.6 million in 2002. Health care costs are also skyrocketing. The average employee's contribution for family coverage rose nearly 50 percent from 2000 to 2003, to an average of \$2,412 a year up from \$1,619.

"In our state, buying coverage in the private individual market is often prohibitively expensive. According to Families USA, in 2002 a typical standard individual health insurance policy in Maryland cost \$1,591 per year for a healthy 25-year-old woman and \$3,101 per year for a healthy 55-year-old woman. A healthy single woman with earnings equal to the poverty level of \$8,980 per year would have to spend about 20 to 30 percent of her entire income on health insurance to buy such a policy.

"Yet too little has been done to address the surging cost of health care and the increasing number of uninsured Americans. In fact, the President has proposed capping federal investment in Medicaid and the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), which could cause over 7 million people to lose coverage by 2013. House Republicans also have supported a Fiscal Year 2005 Budget that would slash \$2.2 billion from the Medicaid program which would threaten much needed assistance to low-income families.

"Republicans' proposed 'solutions' to the health care crisis, Health Savings Accounts (HSAs), Association Health Plans, and medical malpractice reform, do more harm than good and are part of a tired agenda that has already been passed by the House of Representatives. HSAs would siphon off younger and healthier enrollees and drive up health insurance costs for the rest of Americans. Association Health Plans would weaken private insurance coverage by allowing employers to circumvent important consumer protections enacted by the states. And many insurers admit that they will not reduce doctors' premiums if damage awards are arbitrarily capped and injured patients' legal rights restricted, as would happen under the GOP's medical malpractice legislation.

"I hope Republicans will join Democrats this week in committing to a real plan for expanding access to health insurance for all Americans."

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