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On the Issues: Healthcare

Presidential hopefuls propose healthcare reform in varying degrees

By Heather Boerner

The healthcare issues of the 2008 presidential election are as notable for what they highlight as for what they neglect. Abortion may not be the hot-button topic of past elections, but it is still an issue that is on the table. Of the three top candidates, Republican candidate Sen. John McCain is the only pro-life candidate in the bunch—but quietly so.

Instead, when it comes to medical matters, the primary focus for this year's vote is reforming the entire medical system. And for good reason. Nearly 47 million Americans were uninsured in 2006, the last date for which statistics are available. Almost one in five are African American. How McCain, Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Hillary Clinton propose to fix the nation's healthcare situation varies widely.

Will these proposed plans improve your health and bottom line? To find out, we sifted through election-year rhetoric. Here's how the candidate's proposed healthcare plans affect you as a patient and as a businessperson.

Democrats

Hillary Clinton

- Coverage: All Americans must be covered, but you have a choice: stay with your current plan; choose expanded private health insurance that was once available only to members of Congress; or enroll in a new low-cost public plan modeled after Medicare.
- Privatization: Clinton opposes wholesale privatization, preferring a hybrid model.
- Industry regulation: Clinton's plan requires health insurers to offer coverage to every American regardless of pre-existing conditions—they can't deny you coverage or charge you more money for a pre-existing condition. Insurers also will be required to pay for preventative care.
- Cost to business: Large companies will be required to provide health insurance to all employees or contribute to the cost of coverage.
- Cost to individuals: Low-income individuals will receive a tax credit to offset the cost of health insurance.
- Estimated cost of program: \$110 billion annually, paid for with funds currently going to tax cuts for people earning more than \$250,000.

Barack Obama

- Coverage: All children must be covered. Obama's plan opens Congress's private health plan to all individuals. It also creates a public insurance program for individuals who don't receive insurance through their employers and who don't qualify for federal health assistance. Young adults, up to age 25, can receive coverage through their parents' insurance.
- Privatization: Obama opposes wholesale privatization, preferring a hybrid model.
- Industry regulation: Obama's plan requires insurers to cover pre-existing conditions at no extra cost and to pay for preventative care.
- Cost to business: Companies that don't provide health insurance will be required to contribute to the new public health plan.
- Cost to individuals: People who don't qualify for federal assistance but need assistance will receive government subsidies.
- Estimated cost of program: \$50 billion to \$65 billion annually, paid for with funds currently going to tax cuts for people earning more than \$250,000.

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Republicans *John McCain*

- Coverage: McCain's plan aims to extend health coverage by expanding private low-cost health plans, such as high-deductible plans with health savings accounts, and allowing individuals to choose coverage from insurers nationwide. It also calls for more community health clinics in providing care.
- Privatization: McCain supports private plans that use health savings accounts (HSAs) and encourages people to buy "innovative multi-year policies" at a discount, saving the excess in HSAs. He also allows veterans to use their Veterans Administration benefits at private medical centers.
- Industry regulation: McCain's plan would remove state regulation of health plans in order to allow individuals to buy plans in other states. It also requires insurers to provide proof that care is necessary and effective and limits medical malpractice lawsuits and payouts when providers follow established protocols.
- Cost to business: Companies that offer health insurance to employees would lose tax incentives associated with such coverage. The plan also allows small businesses to band together to get better health insurance rates.
- Cost to individuals: Individuals would receive an annual \$2,500 tax credit and families would receive a \$5,000 annual tax credit if they buy their insurance themselves.
- Estimated cost of program: None available.

Mending Fences

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

CANDIDATES CALENDAR

Should Sen. Clinton drop out of the race?

Yes

No

Not Sure

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