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Highlights of Health Care Reform Agenda for the 111th Congress

Under the leadership and vision of President-Elect Obama, and in the face of this year's historic election, we have a unique opportunity to address the failings of our health care system. The steps we need to take to fix our system include improving the quality of care through better information, reducing costs by promoting more efficient care, and expanding coverage to everyone. Here's a list of legislative priorities for the 111th Congress, which build on much of the work undertaken in the 110th Congress. We will work with President-Elect Obama and colleagues in the House and Senate to achieve these important goals.

Health Information Technology

Promoting widespread use of health IT is a critical part of efforts to improve patient care, reduce excess costs, and improve public health.

Widespread adoption of an interoperable health IT system will help save billions of dollars a year in inefficient care, and reduce the estimated 100,000 preventable deaths that take place each year as the result of medical errors. It will also promote health research and assist with public health emergencies such as an influenza outbreak.

The Health-e Information Technology Act (H.R. 6898) takes three important steps to promote the adoption of health IT:

- Promotes standards by a date certain for a health IT system that is fully interoperable and clinically useful.
- Assists providers with the financial resources to adopt such a system.
- Ensures that sensitive patient information remains private and secure.

Comparative Effectiveness Research

Providers and patients need better information about how different treatments for a given illness stack up against one another. Right now, this information is either non-existent, incomplete, or financed by companies that have a financial stake in making their products look good.

The Congressional Budget Office has stated that directly comparing different clinical interventions will improve the quality of care and reduce costs.

The CHAMP Act (section 904 of H.R. 3162), which passed the House in the 110th Congress, provides a framework for establishing and financing a robust comparative effectiveness research program by:

- Expanding federal leadership, in partnership with stakeholders from a variety of fields, in initiating and coordinating research;
- Providing an adequate, guaranteed stream of funding from both private and public sources.
- Taking steps to ensure that such research is of the highest quality and the results are not driven by the influence of for-profit companies.

Strengthen Medicare

After eight years of Administration efforts to undermine and privatize Medicare, the Medicare program faces many challenges and needs to be strengthened so that it can better serve our seniors and those with disabilities. With more than 43 million beneficiaries, improving Medicare is a key part of reforming our nation's health care system. In the coming year, the Health Subcommittee is committed to addressing the following:

- Fixing the broken physician payment system;
- Promoting the use of primary and preventive care;
- Reducing overpayments to Medicare Advantage plans;
- Improving the prescription drug program;
- Making sure Medicare remains affordable, especially for those with lower incomes; and
- Improving other Medicare payment systems to ensure appropriate payments to providers and continued access for beneficiaries.

Supporting Obama's Plans to Expand Health Coverage

At least 46 million individuals are without coverage, and millions more have inadequate coverage. International rankings show that the U.S. fares poorly when compared to other countries on key indicators of quality of care. High health costs are one of many factors contributing to the current economic crisis. Providers and patient advocates, business associations and labor groups, and --most importantly-- the American people, have joined the chorus to demand quality, affordable, guaranteed health care for all. Health reform is possible in the 111th Congress and the Health Subcommittee stands ready to work with the new Administration and our colleagues in the House and Senate to achieve these critical reforms. Health reform should accomplish the following goals:

- Everyone must be covered;
- Everyone must contribute based on their ability;
- The program must build on what works – Public programs and employer-sponsored coverage; and
- The program must control costs and improve quality.

Outline of a Possible Reform Plan

The AmeriCare Health Care Act (H.R. 1841) provides a potential framework to accomplish these goals, consistent with much of President-Elect Obama's plan. AmeriCare is a practical proposal that builds on the current system to provide affordable, comprehensive health care for all, while saving taxpayers money. Under AmeriCare, those who are happy with their current employer-based coverage could keep it, while everyone would have the option of enrolling in AmeriCare -- a new, universally available program modeled on Medicare. AmeriCare streamlines administration by using the tax code to collect payments.

AmeriCare ensures:

- Choice: Individuals may choose to keep the coverage they have, or enroll in a public program option or private plan that meets the program established requirements.
- Comprehensive Coverage: AmeriCare establishes a core set of benefits.
- Cost Containment: Independent analysis from the Commonwealth Fund shows that all households would see significant savings under AmeriCare, with the largest savings for families with low and moderate incomes. In addition, states, local governments and employers would also save.
- Shared Responsibility: AmeriCare is financed by a combination of individual, employer, and federal contributions.