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Reasons to Pass Health Reform

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Here are five reasons why Senators Lincoln and Pryor should vote to pass health reform this week:

Delay kills. Arkansas gains. It's centrist, not radical. Facts should defeat falsehoods. And it's the right thing to do.

1. Delay kills: The longer so many Americans lack health insurance, the more of us die. A lack of insurance raises mortality risk about forty percent. Nationwide, that's an estimated 45,000 extra deaths every year. In Arkansas, roughly 450 die annually from lack of insurance.

Weekly one of us sees patients who make life threatening decisions based on our flawed current system. One is a young woman, an hourly employee at a national firm, who lacks insurance. She noticed a mass in her breast more than a year ago. She didn't seek care early because she couldn't afford the cost of evaluation and treatment or the time she thought she'd be off work. Her cancer spread through her body. She only sought care when she began to lose use of her arm and her pain was out of control. Her prognosis has changed from a 90 percent cure rate for early stage cancer to just pain control and supportive care. She'll die soon.

She is only one face of the multitude who have been failed by our fatally flawed system. Delay in reforming that system multiplies her bleak future by hundreds a year in Arkansas, tens of thousands a year in the nation.

2. Arkansas gains: Medicaid would expand from covering mainly children to covering low-income adults. Middle-income families would get help with premiums too. Medicaid expansion is almost all federal money — a 97-to-3 match through 2019, and nine to one after that. Almost $10 billion in federal dollars would come into the state in 2014 through 2019 alone. That inflow over time will draw large numbers of talented young people into needed professions like primary care medicine and nursing.

The bill extends coverage to about 330,000 uninsured Arkansans. It allows 220,000 young adults to have coverage on their parents' plans. It will close the “donut hole” that now confronts many of Arkansas' 510,000 Medicare beneficiaries with substantial costs for prescription drugs. It provides funding for 74 community health centers.

3. Centrist, not radical: The bill will cut the federal deficit by $138 billion over the first ten years and by much more over the second ten, reports the respected nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office. The added cost of covering the uninsured and helping low and middle income families is fully funded by tax hikes on unearned income and Medicare withholding for high-income earners, and by fees on drug and health insurance companies that will benefit from more customers.

The bill rejects single-payer and public option ideas, to the sorrow of liberals. It taxes high-benefit health plans from 2018, to the sorrow of unions. It excludes undocumented immigrants, to the sorrow of Hispanic groups. It contains numerous elements supported by Republicans in the 1990s.

The “exchanges,” or pools where those without insurance can buy it from private companies or nonprofits, are state-run not federally run. That may mean less consumer protection in some states. But it encourages state-level experimentation for efficiency and effectiveness.

4. Facts should defeat falsehoods: We think health reform opponents have seriously misled much of the American public. They claim this is a socialist “government takeover” of medicine. They claim it will undercut Medicare. They claim almost everyone can now get care who needs it.

Those claims are all false. They have cheapened our political discourse. Health reform is too important for political gamesmanship based on untruths.

5. It's the right thing to do: As Americans, we look out for each other. Bad luck could befall any of us — cancer, stroke, heart attack or car crash. Many of us will need life-saving care. We all need preventive care. Without it, the result is worse disease, higher expense, maybe death. Every other advanced nation understands this, and provides health insurance for all their citizens.

A system that says "every man for himself and devil take the hindmost" seems to us wasteful, short-sighted, and cruel. If nothing is done, costs keep rising, more employers drop coverage, more Americans face medical bankruptcy, more lives are needlessly lost.

The flow of politics offers one chance this era to move the nation forward. That chance is now. It's a conscience vote, a history-defining vote. Senators, grasp that chance.

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