The Iowa circus

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Given the harsh realities of the health insurance marketplace, the decision by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission that employers can reduce or eliminate health benefits for retirees when they turn 65 and become eligible for Medicare shouldn't come as a surprise. Employers are struggling to provide benefits to younger employees, much less those over 65, and still stay competitive.

But AARP and other advocates for older Americans certainly can't be faulted either for contending that the new policy, which is based on a federal appellate court decision in June, clearly contradicts the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967. In its ruling, the 3rd Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in Philadelphia determined that such exemptions to the 1967 act and other federal laws was a "reasonable, necessary and proper exercise" of the commission's authority.

AARP has asked the Supreme Court to review the appellate ruling. That's not only wise but imperative. One way or another, the justices need to weigh in on this issue, not only because the appellate decision stands in such glaring conflict with existing federal law but also because of the far-reaching implications of the new EEOC policy.

Employers, under the new policy, may continue to provide health benefits to retirees younger than 65 not yet eligible for Medicare. We would hope most employers would do so, considering that so many companies today are encouraging workers through buyouts and other plans to retire early. And since those younger retirees aren't eligible for the drug benefits now provided under Medicare, they truly can find themselves financially stuck between a rock and a hard place. They deserve more.

What this shows once again is that the system of providing health care in this country is hopelessly broken and in desperate need of overhaul or reform, call it what you will.

We believe, as do an increasing number of other Americans - including many business and elected leaders - that the remedy should begin with mandatory health insurance for all Americans. Details on specific goals - including choice, cost controls, affordability and far more emphasis on prevention - can then be negotiated.

Reprinted from The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel â€“ CNS.

All eyes are on Iowa this week, and many Americans probably can't believe what they're seeing. Presidential politics usually makes for a good show. But, in the quirky Hawkeye State, it's more like a full-blown carnival.

On Thursday, a relative handful of Democratic and Republican voters will gather in caucuses and emerge with their first-in-the-nation choices for their parties' presidential nominations. This is not a primary election as in most other states. Instead, in Iowa, voters separate into groups. They stand up and publicly declare their preference and then spend the rest of the night trying to convince fellow caucus-goers why they're right and anyone who chooses differently is wrong. As you can imagine, there is a lot of coaxing, arguing and persuading. And after it's over, folks probably go out for a nice breakfast.

And why should the rest of the country care about any of this? Oddly enough, Americans have been conditioned to put significant weight on the results of the Iowa caucuses. Why, we're not sure.

For one thing, Iowa doesn't exactly resemble America. According to the 2000 census, Iowa is about 94 percent white, 3 percent Hispanic, 2 percent black and 1 percent Asian. So its voters can't be representative of Americans. The same goes for New Hampshire, whose Jan. 8 primary follows on the heels of the Iowa caucuses. In fact, you could say that it won't be until Feb. 5 that Americans will hear from a diverse cross-section of the electorate. That is when 22 states will hold their primaries.

Even the issues that matter to Iowans are quirky. Where else is a candidate's position on subsidizing ethanol considered a deal-breaker? John McCain essentially sat out the Iowa caucus campaigning because he has made plenty of enemies among corn farmers there by opposing that practice.

Of course, Iowans are also talking a lot about immigration, but what seems to worry them most is that many immigrants speak Spanish. A few years ago, the Iowa Legislature declared English the state's official language. What's the point of that? Does anyone think that English is on the way out in Iowa? Also, the very notion of holding caucuses instead of a primary invites the kind of theatrics for which Iowa has become famous.

Even the candidates get into the act, as Mike Huckabee did this week when he put together what was described as a tough anti-Mitt Romney ad, only to announce to a startled press corps that he wouldn't be airing the spot after all. His campaign is turning over a new leaf, Huckabee said, and would from now on accentuate the positive over the negative. Then Huckabee proceeded to show the ad to reporters, thereby continuing to play the same game that the candidate insisted he was no longer playing.

In any other state, during any other week, that might seem odd. But in Iowa, during the first week in January 2008, it's about par for the course.

Reprinted from The San Diego Union-Tribune â€“ CNS.

The Iowa circus by The San Diego Union-Tribune