

Wyden: Health care change must come at federal level

by Bend Weekly News Sources

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, introduced legislation yesterday that would give every American the same kind of coverage that Members of Congress receive for the same amount being spent on health care today.

Under the legislation, all Americans -â€“ including the 46 million uninsured -â€“ would be covered by health care insurance for no more than is spent today. The legislation also contains tough cost containment and according to the influential Lewin Group, actually saves \$1.45 trillion over the next decade.

While Wyden commended such states as Massachusetts and California that recently have put forth their own proposals, he said that only the federal government could clean up the federal tax code that has led to a skewed system in which a CEO can write off a designer smile but the local hardware store gets nothing.

â€œAs a result of the new initiatives in Massachusetts, California and other states, some in Congress believe the next few years should be spent watching how the states fare in their efforts. Some believe our role in the Congress should primarily be to ship more federal money to the states for their reforms,â€• Wyden said. â€œRespectfully, I disagree. I believe there is no possible way the states can fix health care because the states did not create the major problems in American health care. Who did? The federal government, the big spender of health dollars in America, the architect of the policies now driving American health care toward implosion.â€•

Wydenâ€™s bill, known as the Healthy Americans Act:

- guarantees private health care coverage that cannot be taken away for all Americans;
- provides benefits for all Americans equal to those of Members of Congress;
- provides incentives for individuals and insurers to focus on prevention, wellness and disease management;
- is fully paid for by more wisely spending the \$2.2 trillion currently spent on health care in America.

Wydenâ€™s goal of universal health coverage for all Americans is supported by a diverse coalition of labor and business. During the roll-out of the legislation in December, Wyden was joined by Andy Stern President of SEIU, a 1.8 million-member labor group; Steve Burd, Chairman, President and CEO of Safeway, a Fortune 50 employer; Ron Pollack from Families USA, a leader on health care for the low-income; Mike Roach, a 30-year member of the National Federation of Independent Businesses and small business owner from Oregon; CEO Bob Beal, a medium-size business owner from Oregon; Malene Davis, President and CEO of Capital Hospice; Don Schumacher, Executive Director of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization; and Pat Maryland, Chairperson, Citizensâ€™ Health Care Working Group.

â€œFrom the very first day under the Healthy Americans Act, individuals, families and businesses win. Individuals get more money in their paycheck, and if they can find lower cost insurance, they have some extra money for a fishing trip to Oregon,â€• Wyden said. â€œEmployers win because with health premiums going up 11 percent this year, employers are glad to be exempt from these increases.â€•

Wyden continued, "It doesn't take long to explain how the Healthy Americans Act works. The Act cuts the link between health insurance and employment. Under the Healthy Americans Act, businesses paying for employee health insurance premiums are required to increase their workers paychecks by the amount they spent last year on their health coverage. Federal tax law is changed to hold the worker harmless for the extra compensation and the worker is required to purchase coverage through an exchange in their state. Insurance companies are required to offer simplified, standardized coverage like a Member of Congress gets and are prohibited from engaging in price discrimination."

Wyden also emphasized the Healthy Americans Act puts a strong, fresh focus on preventive health care.

"Americans really don't have health care at all. They have sick care. We are going to change that. We are going to change that by giving seniors incentives to stay healthy, rewarding parents who enroll their youngsters in wellness programs and pushing private insurers to put a new emphasis on prevention and wellness in the plans they offer."

For more information on the Healthy Americans Act, please visit wyden.senate.gov.

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