

Yes! The Time is Now

Health Care Reform Can Help the Country's Economic Recovery Process

We are celebrating something many of us thought we would never see in our lifetimes, an African-American elected president of the United States. This is a huge milestone for the country and proof that someone running for office today will be judged by the people of this country on the basis of his or her policies/programs and not the color of his or her skin. What a wonderful affirmation of the goodness of the people of this nation.



BY SR. CAROL KEEHAN, DC

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It is now time to bring about a second event that many have believed they would never see in their lifetime, and that is health care for all in our country.

President-elect Barack Obama said reform is one of his top priorities, key members of Congress have put out plans and/or principles calling for it, the secretary-designate of U.S. Department of Health & Human Services has written an excellent book on the importance of it,¹ diverse groups across the spectrum have said it is their priority and, most important, the American electorate named it as their most vital personal economic issue.

This is a historic opportunity to give health security that is accessible and affordable to everyone. This is a historic opportunity to make American businesses again competitive in a global economy. This is a historic opportunity to build a health care delivery system that focuses on quality and efficiency and incentivizes behaviors that promote excellence.

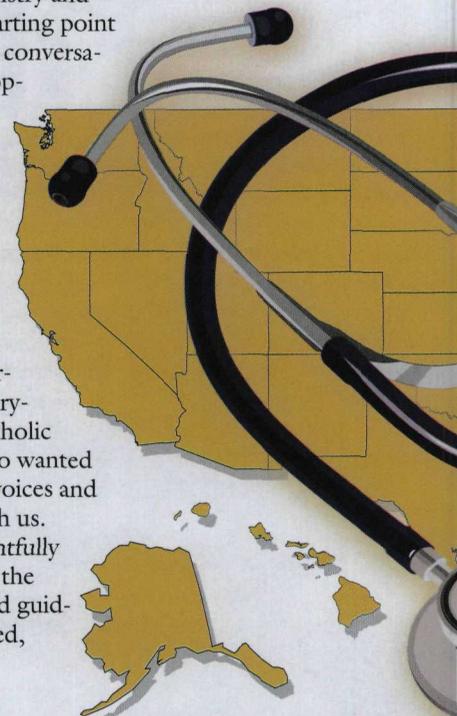
Health security in an enhanced health delivery system would be a wonderful gift to the people of this nation. How people hunger for this. A recent

study found that only 7 percent of the people in this country are confident of their ability to continue to afford their health care. What suffering this causes. And it is clear that the fears are well-founded when more than 50 percent of personal bankruptcies are due to medical debt.

We have an opportunity to write a great new chapter in our nation's history. As exciting as this is, it will not be easy. We must all be prepared to dialogue, study, be creative, change, compromise on issues of preference but not principle, and work together with groups with whom we might have major differences on other issues.

For this reason, two years ago we embarked on a journey to develop CHA's *Our Vision for U.S. Health Care*, a values-based foundation for reform that has been enthusiastically embraced within the ministry and beyond as a starting point for this critical conversation. In developing the document, we sought and received input from across the ministry, including all care settings, administrative and clinical personnel and everyone else in Catholic health care who wanted to share their voices and their views with us.

After thoughtfully considering all the suggestions and guidance we received,



we developed the *Vision* statement, which became a tool to evaluate reform proposals and a way to express our hopes for the future system to lawmakers, community leaders and others. The ministry's vision has been well-received on Capitol Hill and by health care experts and leaders.

This is a time when all of us in the ministry must be very active. Using the principles and our vast experience, we have to bring that wealth to the discussions both in Congress and in our local communities.

Our *Vision* statement begins with clear, compelling values, starting with human dignity, justice, the common good, stewardship and pluralism. As we listen to the people in this nation and the providers, we have heard them repeatedly say these are what are most important to them in the redesign of our health delivery system.

As we go forward in this effort, we must also engage and work closely with our partners at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Charities, as well as Catholic universities and other organizations. We should also be sure to engage dioceses and parishioners to bring the voices of Catholics across the country to the task of moving reform forward. And, finally, we should engage the interfaith community and the general public in our goal, which, at its core, is something all Americans can agree on.

THE ECONOMIC ISSUES

As exciting as this possibility for our future is, we are also sobered by a current, frightening reality, the severe economic crisis that grips our nation and the world. It is made even more frightening because we do

not yet know the full measure of it.

Many have asked, given the economy, must we put health reform on a back burner?

That would be a huge mistake for health care and for the U.S. economy. We can never return to a strong, vibrant U.S. economy without fixing our health care delivery system. Fortunately, today, many businesses, union and political leaders realize that and are showing creative and courageous leadership.

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They are making health reform an integral part of the economic recovery plan. We will not repair our economy by continuing to create bailout plans, grant bridge loans and cut interest rates. We must find a way to achieve health care reform that is worthy of the American people and compatible with our cultural values. If we call on the American creativity and genius, we can build a health care delivery system that is more efficient and effective and covers everyone. We can build a system that will make businesses competitive, make it possible for small businesses to buy insurance and avoid severe wage depression to millions of working Americans. To do that, we must focus on enacting health care reform that provides everyone with a reasonable basic package.

To continue to have 9 million children without even basic health insurance is a scandal we cannot allow. What possible excuse is there for not giving a child basic health care? This situation is utterly incompatible for those of us who claim a pro-life position. We must be effective in correcting it.

These are challenging and exciting times. To be part of making our country's health delivery system more effective and efficient for everyone is the opportunity we have hoped and prayed for. CHA will work with all of the ministry, our elected leaders and others to help this become a reality. I look forward to your thoughts, suggestions and help in this wonderful journey. Let us pray for wisdom and courage for all of those who will be involved in the important decisions that will determine our future. ■



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NOTE

1. Tom Daschle et al., *Critical: What We Can Do About The Health Care Crisis* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2008).