

McCain Opposes Mandating Insurance Coverage

BY JOYCE FRIEDEN
Senior Editor

For Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), having health insurance is desirable but not mandatory.

"I don't think there should be a mandate for every American to have health insurance," the Republican presidential hopeful said at a forum on health care policy sponsored by Families USA and the Federation of American Hospitals. "If it's affordable and available, then it seems to me it's a matter of choice amongst Americans," he said.



As Sen. McCain sees it, health insurance is something many people decide they don't want. "The 47 million Americans that are without health insurance today, a very large portion of them are healthy young Americans who simply choose not to" sign up for it, he said at the forum, which was underwritten by the California Endowment and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. He added, however, that some people with chronic illnesses and other preexisting conditions do have problems accessing insurance, "and we have to make special provisions for them, including additional trust funds for Medicaid payments [for people] who need this kind of coverage."

Sen. McCain, who is serving his fourth term in Congress, said his priority as president would be to rein in health care costs. "I'm not going to force Americans to do

it; I don't think that's the role of government," he said. "But if we can bring down costs, as I believe we can ... I'm absolutely convinced more and more people will take advantage of [health insurance]."

One way to control costs at the federal level is to not pay for medical errors involving Medicare patients, Sen. McCain

A 'very large portion' of the uninsured 'are healthy young Americans who simply choose not to sign up for it.

SEN. MCCAIN

certain set amount of money directly related to overall care and results. That way we remove the incentives now in place for overmedicating, overtaxing, and overindulging in unnecessary procedures. I also think it rewards good performance by the providers."

To expand access to health insurance, Sen. McCain is proposing a refundable tax credit of \$2,500 per individual and \$5,000 per family to help the uninsured buy health insurance policies. To pay for the tax credits—which would cost the government an estimated \$3.5 trillion over 10 years—he proposes abolishing the tax deduction that employees currently take when they pay premiums on their employer-sponsored health plans. He would, however, leave intact the deduction that employers currently take on their portion of the premiums as an incentive for employers to continue offering coverage.

"The important thing about the ... re-

fundable tax credit for employees is for them to go out and make choices," Sen. McCain said during the forum. "When it's their money and their decision, I think they make much wiser decisions than when it's provided by somebody else." And because the tax credit is refundable, low-income Americans who currently pay no taxes will receive a check for the amount of the credit, he noted.

When a reporter pointed out that the average cost of a family health insurance policy is more than \$12,000 per year—far higher than the amount of the proposed family tax credit—Sen. McCain said the credit still would be beneficial. "One thing it does is if someone has a gold-plated health insurance policy, they'll start to pay taxes [on those premiums] and it may make them make different decisions about the extent and coverage of their health insurance plan," he said. "Another thing it does that I think is very important is that for low-income people who have no health insurance today, at least now they've got

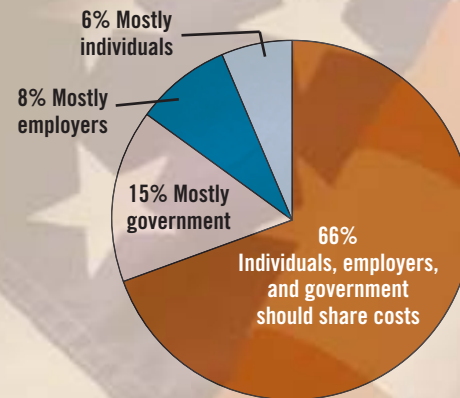
\$2,500, or \$5,000 in the case of a family, to go out and at least start beginning to have [it]." The senator said he did not have an estimate of how many uninsured people would be able to buy health insurance coverage because of the tax credit.

Sen. McCain said he does not support outlawing the "cherry-picking" that some health plans do to make certain they insure mostly healthy people. Instead, he favored broadening the high-risk pools that states use to provide coverage for some of their uninsured residents. "I would rather go that route than mandate that health insurance companies under any condition would have to accept a certain level of patients." ■



DATA WATCH

Who Should Pay for Americans' Health Insurance?



Notes: Based on a 2007 survey of 3,501 adults. Does not total 100% because "did not answer" and "don't know" were not included.
Source: Commonwealth Fund Biennial Health Insurance Survey

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