Making the Case: Prevention and Health Reform

Prevention and Health Care Reform

The nation’s economic future demands we find ways to reduce health care costs. Keeping people healthier is one of the most effective ways to lower health care costs and ensure our workforce is strong and productive enough to compete in the challenging economic climate.

America must provide quality, affordable health care to all. But that’s not enough. A strong public health system focused on prevention of disease and injury must be a cornerstone of a health reform plan.

The public health system is focused on keeping Americans healthier, by helping individuals avoid preventable diseases and keeping communities safe from health threats. Prevention can improve the quality of people’s lives, spare millions of people from needless suffering, and eliminate billions of dollars of unnecessary health care costs.

- **Poor Health is a Threat to U.S. Economic Competitiveness -- It’s Time to Invest in a Healthier, More Productive Workforce.** The skyrocketing costs of health care threaten to bankrupt American businesses, causing some companies to drop health care benefits or to send jobs to other countries where costs are lower and productivity is higher. Helping people stay healthy and better manage illnesses are the best ways to drive down health care costs. Keeping American workers and families well will help American businesses get back on track and compete with the rest of the world.

- **Health Care Has Focused for Too Long on Treating People After They Are Already Sick Instead of Keeping Them Well in the First Place -- It’s Time to Shift From a “Sick Care” System to a “Health Care” System.** Even though America spends more than $2 trillion annually on health care -- more than any other nation in the world -- tens of millions of Americans suffer every day from preventable illnesses like diabetes, heart disease, some forms of cancer, and infectious diseases, which rob them of health and quality of life.

  - **The nation has not focused on developing strategies to help improve the health of Americans, and the health of Americans is suffering.** For instance, experts widely agree three of the most important conditions that influence health are physical activity, nutrition, and smoking, but right now:
Two-thirds of Americans are obese or overweight, and more than one-quarter of health care costs are related to obesity. Health care costs of obese workers are up to 21 percent higher than for non-obese workers. Obese and physically inactive workers suffer from lower worker productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher workers’ compensation claims. Obese workers submit, on average, twice as many workers’ compensation claims as non-obese workers, and these claims are far more expensive. About one-quarter of U.S. children are obese or overweight, placing them at risk of serious health complications during both childhood and adulthood.

More than 20 percent of adults currently smoke in the U.S., and tobacco use costs the country almost $180 billion annually in health care costs. Lifetime health care costs for an individual who smokes is $17,500 higher than for an individual who does not smoke. Productivity losses from premature death related to tobacco use totals $97 billion annually. Exposure to secondhand smoke leads to an average of $10 billion annually in health care costs. Ninety percent of tobacco smokers started smoking before the age of 18 and two-thirds of those become regular, daily smokers by the age of 19, so preventing initiation during childhood is critical.

Investing in Strategic, Proven Disease Prevention Programs, Both Inside and Outside the Doctor’s Office, Can Dramatically Lower Health Care Costs -- It’s Time to Make a Smart Investment in Keeping Americans Healthy.

- A Small Strategic Investment in Disease Prevention Programs in Communities Can Result in a Big Payoff in a Short Time. According to an analysis by Trust for America’s Health (TFAH), an investment of $10 per person per year in proven community-based programs to increase physical activity, improve nutrition, and prevent smoking and other tobacco use could save the country more than $16 billion annually within five years. This is a return of $5.60 for every $1.

- Community-based disease prevention programs keep people out of the doctor’s office and lower family health care costs. Examples of these programs include providing increased access to affordable nutritious foods in schools and communities, increasing sidewalks and parks in communities, and supporting smoking quit-lines.

- Many efforts have shown strong results, for instance: Reducing adult smoking rates by one percent could result in more than
30,000 fewer heart attacks, 16,000 fewer strokes, and savings of more than $1.5 billion over five years; and if one-tenth of Americans began a regular walking program, $5.6 billion could be saved in the treatment of heart disease.

- **Immunizations, Screenings, and Other Medical Prevention Help Save Lives and Money.** The Partnership for Prevention has identified a series of clinical preventive and early detection measures that, if fully adopted by 90 percent of the population, could save 100,000 lives a year. Examples of these measures include flu and pneumococcal shots for seniors, immunizations for children, and screenings for several types of cancer.

  - **The health and financial savings can be significant,** for example: routine childhood immunizations prevent more than 14 million cases of disease annually and result in $50 billion saved annually in direct and indirect health costs; and if all seniors were vaccinated for pneumonia, health care costs could be reduced by $1 billion per year.

- **Numerous Corporate Prevention and Wellness Programs Have Seen Positive Returns.** Some examples include:

  - Caterpillar’s corporate wellness program, Health Balance, is expected to save $700 million the company by 2015.
  
  - MetLife estimates a 2.52 return on investment from its corporate fitness programs, which costs approximately $550,000 a year, a savings of nearly $1.4 million per year. The percentage of MetLife employees who were previously considered at high risk for cardiovascular disease has dropped from approximately 35 percent of a 200 person random sample to less than 10 percent.
  
  - Motorola’s Wellness program saves the company $3.93 for every $1 invested in wellness benefits.

**Health Reform Must Include Disease Prevention**

- A National Prevention Strategy must be developed and implemented to reduce rates of chronic diseases and contain health care costs.

- The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) should be directed to develop a National Prevention Strategy that sets specific goals and objectives for improving the nation’s health through federally-supported prevention programs. The strategy would demonstrate how programs funded through the Trust Fund would integrate with other prevention programs funded by DHHS, other federal entities, and state, local
and private sector initiatives. The National Prevention Strategy would be consistent with the Healthy People 2020 goals and would identify priorities for expenditures under the Trust Fund that relate to Healthy People.

- **A Public Health and Wellness Trust Fund is needed to support and sustain disease prevention programs so that our national investment in health reform can realize the fullest possible return on investments aimed at keeping Americans healthy.**

  - The Trust Fund could be funded through a mandatory appropriation or set-aside of a portion of new revenues generated through the financing of health reform. Resources from the Trust Fund would be allocated to specific public health programs or activities as directed by the appropriations committees. Funding would augment, not supplant, current annual baseline funding for Function 550 public health programs. The Trust Fund would support expansion of public health functions and services that surround, support, & strengthen the health care delivery system. It would finance:

  - Population-level non-clinical prevention and wellness programs, which can be delivered through governmental agencies and non-governmental agencies. Programs would be evidence-based community prevention programs that target priority health outcomes as identified in the National Prevention Strategy.
  
  - The core governmental public health functions of assessment, assurance, and policy development that protect and promote the health of everyone.
  
  - Clinical preventive services (such as screenings and immunizations) that are not covered by third party payers and delivered in community settings or by health departments.
  
  - Workforce training and development, as well as public health research.

*Trust for America’s Health is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority.*

[www.healthyamericans.org](http://www.healthyamericans.org)