

Remarks of
Governor Lowell Weicker, Jr.
President of The Trust for America's Health
Before The Muslim Coalition of Connecticut
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Thank you for inviting me this evening to discuss health care.

I am pleased to be among those who are promoting understanding across cultures and bringing people together in peaceful ways.

I wish some of the politicians down in Washington would take a lesson from all of you as to civility and taking positive approaches toward building solutions.

After nearly a year of debate in Washington, we are moving closer to the possibility that the country may have the first significant reform of our health care system in decades. But the rancor of the debate has been a distraction from its importance.

Extremists on both sides of the political aisle have been noisy, irrational and demagogic. My message to them is simple: "Knock it off!" Speaking for myself, I can't remember when I've appreciated invectives banging my eardrums while ill. Well, I'm sure that also applies to the thousands who in a similar condition are praying for relief.

Will those who have it all have to share with those who have nothing? Probably. That has certainly always been the American way.

As I stand here today, can I tell you what the final version of health care reform will be? Absolutely not! Which brings me to the point of challenging those who oppose the bill. -- What bill? -- Nothing has been set in stone yet.

What I do know is that reform is sorely needed. And I know that if we do nothing to fix the nation's present "sick care" system, millions of people will continue to become ill, suffer needlessly, and die.

What should not be part of the national discourse is a politics of fear. Specifically, setting generation against generation. I am 78 years old. There's plenty of room for both me and my grandchildren under the health reform tent.

The worst thing we can do is throw our hands in the air and give up. Much of the hostile dialogue has been created by people who want health care to fail -- people who profit monetarily from the status quo and people who hope to profit politically. But such profits come only at the expense of helping the rest of us achieve better health.

The system we have now is broken -- not just a little broken. It's severely broken. Unless we take action, health care costs will continue to skyrocket.

Right now, we spend 2 trillion dollars a year on health care -- more than any other nation on earth -- yet, we're not getting much for our money. Americans are sicker than nearly every other industrialized nation in the world.

And, I'm sad to report that the future looks worse. Experts predict that today's children may be the first generation in U.S. history to have shorter, less healthy lives than their parents.

So, where to start our discussion? Easy. With the Congress of the United States.

Senators and Representatives have great health insurance paid for by the citizenry -- us. In addition, they have a first rate "medical home" with access to check ups and preventive care at the Bethesda Naval Hospital or the Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and a complete physician's office in the Capitol. As a retired Senator, I still carry my government health insurance which covers me, my wife, and disabled son at a rate of some three hundred plus dollars a month.

So, I know Congress can take care of itself. Now we need to remind them that they have to take care of the rest of the country. Every American, regardless of race, ethnicity, and economic circumstances should have the opportunity to be as healthy as he or she can be. Since this is a representative democracy, every American deserves the same health care as a member of Congress. If that's too expensive for the nation, then it's too expensive for Congress.

The present system is filled with inequities -- according to the Institute of Medicine, 47 million Americans lack health insurance which directly leads to 18,000 people dying each year due to lack of coverage. While Republicans and Democrats have been pointing fingers and shouting at each other over a public option, millions of American families are struggling to care for loved ones who don't have access to routine medical care and whose first and last recourse is the hospital emergency room. That is not acceptable in the United States.

And this debate isn't just about the people who are currently uninsured. Premiums are growing at dramatic rates. Premiums are 90 percent higher than they were less than 10 years ago. So, even families with insurance are often unprotected from catastrophic events because high deductibles and staggering costs leave essential care out of reach.

Despite the acrimony and partisanship, I am encouraged that the President and many in Congress have made reform of our nation's health care system a priority this year.

I believe the last election was about getting our priorities straight. Bad health is our country's worst enemy. Without our health, we have nothing. Without our children's health, we have no future.

While people in Washington are so caught up with how to pay for health care reform and talking about deficits, we should remember that just one year's budget for fighting the war in Iraq could pay for 10 years of health care under the proposals pending in Congress. The loudest voices for fiscal discipline today are those who for nearly 10 years have championed wars without paying for them.

We must remind our elected officials that it's now the turn of health care for every American family. In short, it's time to prioritize life rather than death in our national budget.

But, as legislation moves forward in Congress, we also need to remember that decades-old problems don't fix themselves overnight. And that perfection isn't always possible.

The proposals represent good, important progress. If passed, millions of additional Americans will be able to get insurance by letting more people who are subsisting just above the poverty level qualify for Medicaid. The bills will also help foster much needed competition in the health care industry -- so a few powerful insurers can no longer dictate unreasonable terms that we are helpless to fight against. The legislation would make it harder for insurance companies to deny coverage to people with pre-existing conditions and for insurance companies to throw people off insurance when they get sick.

Both the legislation under consideration in the House and in the Senate provide better care to people as they age to support care that allows them to stay in their homes and with their families longer and won't require people to deplete their life savings to afford nursing home care.

Even if the bills are not perfect -- we can't make holding out for the perfect become the enemy of the good.

Most of the news coverage about health reform has focused on how we pay the bills. Clearly, controlling costs and making sure no one is denied care because of cost are huge concerns.

But to me, the most important question of health reform is how we get beyond just talking about how to pay for care and instead find ways to actually improve the health of Americans.

We've been so focused on how to pay the bill that we've forgotten the point. We need to let doctors and health professionals do their real jobs -- which is providing every American with the opportunity to be as healthy as they could or should be. We need to

spend more of our energy on keeping people healthier in the first place instead of only treating them after they become sick.

With all of the cost-oriented debates going on, one of the most important parts in all of the bills under consideration in Congress is being overlooked -- support for disease prevention. If passed, these bills could lead to the greatest advancements in disease prevention and wellness our nation has seen in decades.

And, there are important proposals in these bills to recruit more general practitioners, nurses, and nurse practitioners. Over the years, the medical system has been turned on its head, where we have to go to specialist after specialist for every different aspect of our health care -- but no one is really keeping track of all our problems or how these problems interact with each other.

We need to get back to a system where we have general practitioners and nurses who provide real primary care, where we have a "medical home" -- so we have someone we can see and talk to about all of the different aspects of our health and how the different pieces fit together.

For me, the most frustrating thing about the nation's health care crisis is that solutions are within our reach. The reason that the health of so many Americans is failing has little to do with the limitations of science or talented, dedicated medical personnel.

Dramatic scientific and medical breakthroughs over the last several decades have been remarkable, enabling scientists, doctors, and public health officials to make great strides diagnosing, treating, and controlling the spread of diseases. Vaccines, early-detection cancer screenings, school-based tobacco cessation efforts, and workplace wellness programs have improved the quality of life for millions of Americans.

Let's stop for a minute and just think about two of the leading issues that affect how healthy we are -- our weight and whether we smoke. Right now, here in Connecticut, more than 21 percent of adults are obese, and while this is one of the lowest rates of obesity in the country, it still means that nearly one quarter of our state is at high risk for a range of serious diseases associated with obesity, like type 2 diabetes and heart disease.

And the next generation looks like it is in worse shape, with 25.7 percent of Connecticut's kids weighing in as obese or overweight. On top of that, more than 17 percent of our citizens still smoke.

We have two choices. We can wait until people develop expensive and painful health problems and pay the price -- or we can try to prevent disease by investing in proven prevention programs that make healthy choices easier choices for people all over the state.

The fact that you and I can sit in this room and debate while breaking bread proves there is a common thread of hope, decency and respect which runs through all faiths.

I am an Episcopalian who attends a Congregational Church -- thanks to a remarkable man, David Good.

I was a Republican/Independent elected in an overwhelmingly Democratic State.

I am of English/German stock in a State that is heavily of Italian origins, as my wife will attest.

I am a Christian among Muslims this evening.

In short, I am an American in a country where the individual counts for more than the statistics -- a country whose Constitution makes all the above possible without rancor or chaos.

Now, I want to be part of an America where the less fortunate have the same chance for good health as the rest of us. That and not selfishness is an imperative for a civilized people.

Thank you.