

Health-reform train is leaving the station

By Judi Hilman

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated: 05/01/2009 05:36:19 PM MDT

Judi Hilman columnist Congress has made a controversial decision on national health reform: The federal budget includes provisions allowing health-reform legislation to be approved by a simple Senate majority (51 votes) instead of the filibuster-proof 60 votes.

However, for reforms to be successful, they must be truly bipartisan right out of the gate. Thankfully, I am not alone in this belief. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont., indicated last week that he would like to avoid the reconciliation process altogether.

"If we jam something down somebody's throat, it's not sustainable," said Baucus. He is right. But, like it or not, the reconciliation threat is real. It says that comprehensive national health reforms will happen this year, though critical details have yet to be sorted out.

Right now we know this: Baucus and Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., have opened the door to substantive bipartisan input, and we must walk through it. This is our chance to bring Utah values of fiscal restraint and personal responsibility into the reform framework. Without them, reforms will be neither sustainable nor meaningful.

A starting point for reform must be the recognition that we are already spending enough in the U.S. to cover everyone -- we're just not spending our dollars efficiently. Our current system encourages procedures for procedures' sake and generally at the expense of quality and value.

Reforms must ensure that doctors have access to the latest research comparing the clinical and cost effectiveness of different types of treatment. That will help doctors and patients choose the best treatment and make more informed choices rather than waste money on less-effective treatments.

Utah is already ahead of the game on this front -- we have the most cost-effective health care in the nation. For this reason, we need to bring our proven experience to bear on the national debate.

As the first state to attempt comprehensive reforms, Massachusetts spent more than \$1.6 billion to expand coverage and imposed mandates on individuals and employers, but even this was not enough. These were critical steps, to be sure, but beyond that Massachusetts needed to create a "culture of coverage."

Our entire community, starting with "young immortals," needs to understand the importance of coverage and how to use it wisely. Only when we take personal responsibility for our health will the market begin to function as it should. Only then will we limit cost growth.

I am often asked whether national health reforms will pre-empt reform efforts at the state level. While the national process will likely establish the overarching goals of covering all of the uninsured and pooling risk across the community, states might well be given the opportunity to innovate within federal parameters. Such a federalist approach would help us achieve the paramount goals of reform in ways that build on our strengths and on the unique features of our market.

With national reform a virtual certainty, Utah must keep our seat at the table. Our stalwart pro-business disposition should help us bring urgency to the process along with a sense of balance: Small businesses, the engine of economic recovery, have the most to gain from national reforms, but only if these changes include proven strategies for financial sustainability and personal responsibility.

This is where Utah's congressional delegation comes in. They need to make their -- and our -- voices heard at this momentous time.

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