

Title:

Senator Breaux Calls For "Ceasefire" On Health Care

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Summary:

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Article Body:

The country's health care system is in crisis. The number of uninsured Americans is at an all-time high, health insurance premiums are rising, health disparities are plaguing our nation and Medicaid is under major strain. While I wholeheartedly support broad health reform, we'll never get there if policymakers can't even implement gradual reforms that have broad-based support.

We all remember the television program "Crossfire," where the moderator's goal was to encourage heated debate between people on opposing sides of an issue. I've come up with an alternative: the "Ceasefire on Health Care: Finding Common Ground for the Uninsured" series to stimulate dialogue among leading bipartisan policymakers and advocates. Over the last year, I have moderated several events in which participants are encouraged to come to an agreement on health care issues and public policies.

Since the inauguration of Ceasefire, I have held forums featuring prominent health care reform advocates, among them former HHS Secretaries Donna Shalala and Tommy Thompson, and Senator Hillary Clinton and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich. I can report that there are indeed practical solutions to the nation's health care problems that have bipartisan support. But for progress to be made, members of Congress must put aside their differences and focus on these areas of agreement.

First, Americans want Congress to work together to end the crisis of the uninsured. Lawmakers must talk to each other so that they can develop a meaningful solution to the problem. The answer lies not in a government-run system or a fend-for-yourself marketplace, but, instead, a middle path that

combines the best of both. This incremental, market-based approach will also stipulate that individuals take greater responsibility for their own health.

Another idea that has bipartisan support is the modernization of health information technology. Providers of health care services should be able to access a patient's medical record on a computer and systems should be able to "talk" to each other; health care costs will be reduced, as will medical errors.

Making children a priority is a message we have received loud and clear in our forums. The State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) was created in 1997 to expand health care coverage to needy children. It has been very successful, yet there are still millions of children who remain uninsured. Expanding SCHIP will help them significantly gain access to health care, but it must be done in a responsible manner. It also creates an opportunity for the states and federal government to work together.

We must shift our health care system away from being treatment-focused to concentrating on prevention and wellness. Chronic diseases are among the most common and expensive health problems, yet they are also often preventable. Given the enormous toll chronic diseases are taking on our health care system, I believe that there could be bipartisan support for programs that study the causes of these diseases and promote healthy behaviors.

The nation as a whole strongly supports bipartisan health care reform. Eighty-eight percent of those recently surveyed by Ceasefire support this proposition. I also personally believe most of our legislators have a proven interest in healing our ailing health care system and that the first step in any reform is dialogue. Now it's time for Congress to quit fighting each other and in a bipartisan fashion fight to solve this major problem.

• Former Senator John Breaux (D-LA) served in the United States Senate from 1987 to 2005.