

New congressional report says Wyden-Bennett health plan would pay for itself

By MATTHEW DALY , Associated Press

May 1, 2008

WASHINGTON - A bipartisan plan for universal health care coverage would pay for itself and eventually could create modest budget surpluses, according to a congressional report released Thursday.

The report by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office and Joint Committee on Taxation said the health care plan could be fully operational by 2012 and become "budget-neutral" by 2014. That means the plan would bring in as much revenue as it costs to implement.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., one of the plan's co-sponsors, said the report showed it is possible to provide health care coverage for all Americans — including the estimated 47 million people who are uninsured — without a large tax increase.

"We can get everyone in America health care coverage without breaking the bank," he said.

Sen. Robert Bennett, R-Utah, the other sponsor of the legislation, said the report confirmed that the plan would not only cut health-care costs but actually save money in the long run.

"I am convinced we can reach our goal to improve coverage and provide affordable, private health insurance to every American," Bennett said at a news conference with Wyden and other Senate supporters of the bill.

The so-called Healthy Americans Act would replace the current employer-based health insurance system with a system in which the government requires, subsidizes, and oversees a system of private health care plans that individuals select. The coverage would be guaranteed to be as good as that which federal employees receive, and the government would subsidize health care for people up to 400 percent of the poverty level.

The plan is paid for in part by changes to the tax code, including a new tax on employers of between 3 percent and 26 percent. Wyden labels the tax "employer-shared responsibility payments" and notes that they would replace money employers now spend to provide private health insurance for their workers. The employer payments are expected to generate up to \$100 billion a year in federal revenue.

"Employers like this plan, and the reason they like it is because it cuts their current and future health care costs," Wyden said.

Andy Stern of the Service Employees International Union, Safeway chief executive Steve Burd and Todd Stottlemyer of the National Federation of Independent Business are among those who have worked with Wyden and Bennett on the proposal, which has drawn 12 co-sponsors in the Senate.

Wyden, who has not endorsed a candidate in the Democratic primary, said he has been in touch with all three leading candidates for president: Sens. Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama, both Democrats, and Republican John McCain. Each has separate proposals for health care reform, but Wyden and Bennett said their plan could serve as the basis for a proposal by any of the three candidates once elected.

© 2008 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.