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MARCH 22-28 IS ‘COVER THE UNINSURED WEEK’

Maine’s come far since 1994 Health Reform Debate-But still has a ways to go

(Augusta) It’s been 15 years since our nation has had a serious discussion about health reform. Over the years what has been a bad situation has only gotten worse. The health care system in Maine and the nation has been pushed to the breaking point.

The bottom line is that rising health care costs are making it tough for Maine families to stay afloat. During these uncertain economic times when the price of housing and groceries are putting a strain on family budgets, health care costs continue to spin out of control. As a result, more people are going without health coverage.

“As the economy worsens, we are seeing a tremendous increase in calls on the Consumers for Affordable Health Care (CAHC) HelpLine. People are desperate for answers as they lose their jobs, and with it their employer-sponsored health insurance. We’ve done a great job in Maine in leading the nation by getting important health care and coverage protections on our law books and adding programs like Dirigo Health. The two steps combined have helped us lower our rate of uninsured more than most other states in the country. But we need to do more now to reform our entire health care system. Otherwise the combination of exploding health coverage and care costs and the loss of employment are going to undermine a decade and a half of work in our state—and for the first time since 1994 force more Mainers into the ranks of the uninsured. And that will only cost us all more in the long run,” says CAHC Communications Coordinator Cherilee Budrick .

As we observe, “Cover the Uninsured Week,” The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation released a new report, “At the Brink: Trends in America’s Uninsured 1994-2007,” which chronicles state-by-state health coverage trends. During the last 15 years, America has seen increased numbers of uninsured residents, greater costs for workers amidst flat incomes, and significant erosion of private coverage. (For more information, see www.rwjf.org) The report shows that from 1994 through 2007 Maine reduced the number of uninsured people, but our businesses and families are paying a much greater cost for their coverage than the rest of the country.

From 1994 to 2007 Maine:

- Increased the number of non-elderly Mainers with insurance by more than 20,000 people.
- More than doubled the number of insured children.
- Businesses and families started paying more in premiums for insurance than nearly every other state in the country.
- Incomes increased at a rate much lower than most other states in the country.

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The above trends can't continue, especially in this economy. While the numbers are grim, the sad truth is that the situation is likely even worse than any of us realize. The most recent government numbers do not take into consideration the thousands of Mainers— our friends, neighbors and relatives – who are losing their jobs and insurance every month.

As we have clearly seen over the past decade and a half, the longer we wait to fix health care, the worse it gets. It's a vicious cycle. When costs go up, more people become uninsured. The more people who are uninsured, the more costs go up for our entire health care system.

Fortunately a lot has changed since the 1990s. There's consensus among diverse stakeholders that action is needed, promising solutions at the state level to provide examples and a commitment from leaders in Washington to reform the system.

Waiting for Congress to act, however should not postpone state action in Maine. In order to achieve a healthier and more prosperous state we will need strong leadership and commitment from our state and national leaders.

Consumers for Affordable Health Care is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that has been helping Maine people get quality, affordable health care for more than 20 years.

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