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SCHAKOWSKY CALLS FOR UNIVERSAL HEALTH COVERAGE FOR ALL

Joins Rep. Stark in introduction of AMERICARE Health Act

WASHINGTON, DC -- Today U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) joined colleagues in introducing a bill that would address the health care crisis facing America. Below is the full text of Rep. Schakowsky's statement:

Thank you, Congressman Stark. I am proud to be here with you today and to be working with you to achieve what our country desperately needs: a guarantee of affordable, comprehensive and high-quality coverage for all.

It is a national shame and a personal tragedy for many Americans that we, alone in the developed world, have failed to provide that guarantee. It is a disgrace that Americans are going bankrupt, going without needed care and dying because they cannot afford medical care. The Institute of Medicine estimates that 18,000 Americans a year die because they are uninsured. The number of Americans living with illnesses that could have been prevented or with treatable diseases that are going untreated is much higher. It is time for a new direction in health care - a 21st century solution that makes the long overdue commitment to universal coverage.

Dr. Hacker and I appeared together last month at the Take Back America conference, where we spoke about the need to improve the Medicare drug benefit and to provide universal health care. AmeriCare meets both goals, and I am proud to be joining with Pete Stark in introducing it this week.

This bill is a common sense approach - building on Medicare and the option of employment-based coverage. It would simplify medical care - allowing providers to spend more time with patients and less time trying to sort out the different forms and procedures required by multiple insurance companies. It would provide a full range of needed services. It is comprehensive - not a barebones policy masquerading as a solution to our health care crisis.

It would save money. The system-wide savings from universal coverage would be between \$320 billion and \$1.1 trillion over ten years.

It makes health care affordable for individuals and families, businesses and taxpayers not by cutting access to care but by improving the efficiency of health care delivery and eliminating administrative costs. It makes our country stronger, more prosperous and more competitive.

AmeriCare is more than a solution for the uninsured, it is also a solution for the poorly-insured and for the currently well-insured who could lose that coverage if they lose their job or get sick

or injured. AmeriCare will also improve the health and financial security of Medicare beneficiaries -- who still face high out-of-pocket costs and gaps in benefits that place them at risk.

Medicare is improved so that senior citizens and persons with disabilities will face lower cost-sharing requirements and, for the first time, will benefit from an annual out-of-pocket limit on those costs. It will end discrimination against mental health services. And it will provide meaningful prescription drug coverage - requiring negotiation with drug companies and eliminating the donut hole - the \$2850 gap in coverage that 7 million seniors and disabled people will face this year.

AmeriCare provides the policy solution but Rep. Stark and I both understand that its enactment will depend on a demonstration of public demand and political will. We are committed to that side of the equation as well. There is no question that health care is at the top of Americans' issue agenda. Everywhere I go, I hear from families, businesses, farmers, state and local officials, doctors, nurses, hospital officials, faith leaders and others about the need for action.

All you have to do is open up a newspaper or magazine or listen to the news and you will hear about the problems created by the lack of affordable universal coverage.

For example, the Summer 2006 National Council of Jewish Women devotes its main article to the subject. In "Diagnosing Women's Health Care," it talks about the 17 million uninsured women who are unable to afford preventive and early care, women go in and out of job-based coverage as they take time off for caregiving responsibilities, and the low-income women on Medicare who are unable to bear its high cost-sharing burdens. It concludes:

"Health-care costs are skyrocketing. And for the 17 million uninsured women in the United States who suffer disproportionately, the prognosis isn't good. It's time to get serious. This social ill isn't going to cure itself."

There are many who are skeptical about the political prospects for universal coverage. It is true that it won't be easy. But I believe that we will win the battle because I believe that we have no other choice. The problem is too big and too pervasive to ignore - every sector of our economy, every medical provider and virtually every family has a health care affordability or access problem that they want solved.

The current situation is completely unsustainable and the economic, health and security costs of not taking action are too great. During the last universal health care debate, frequent mention was made of Winston Churchill's comment that, "The Americans will always do the right thing... after they've exhausted all the alternatives."

We've tried everything else and now it's time to do the right thing. I want to thank the organizations and individuals who have already voiced support for AmeriCare. I look forward to working with you in spreading the word about this critical bill and in building the political momentum necessary to get it passed.