

Statement by Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Senate Democratic Policy Committee Hearing
“The Problem of the Uninsured”
January 6, 2004

The simple fact is that we have an untenable and indefensible problem in this country: 43.6 million people without health insurance.

This is a problem that has long been with us, and it is a problem which is getting worse, every year.

The enormity of that number sometimes numbs us. We can get caught up in the statistics and forget that each one of those millions of people face the problem of not being able to get health care when they need it, of not being able to pay for their sick child's medicine, or get the diagnostic tests and treatment they need for serious health conditions. They face the constant threat of going into enormous debt when they end up in the hospital or need costly treatment. They can't get the prescription drugs they need.

And even those who have some health insurance coverage today may find themselves without it tomorrow. People who have coverage see it eroding. People who lose their jobs lose their coverage and can't afford to keep their benefits.

This is not and cannot be an acceptable situation.

It is a mark of our mutual concern that this problem is the topic of the first hearing of the year. We cannot as a nation afford to let this problem continue.

But as we look at the problem, and what we can do about it, I think we have to keep certain basic principles in mind.

First, we have to recognize that the problem would be considerably worse if we did not have Medicaid, Medicare, and the Children's Health Insurance Program. These are public programs, and they are public programs that work. Without these programs, millions and millions more of the most vulnerable among us would be uninsured.

We've got to protect those programs, and make sure the resources are there for them to continue to provide coverage. And we know we can build on their successes and provide coverage for millions of low-income adults and parents. Lots of those people are in the work force, but they either don't have access to employer based coverage or they can't afford it. We know how to cover them—we're doing a pretty good job of covering their kids. We should expand the programs we know work, and get them coverage.

In my mind, we've got to stop worrying that expansion of public programs might somehow mean we're covering people who might have otherwise been covered in the private health insurance market. Take people of modest income and get them coverage where we know we can reach them and make it affordable.

Second, it is obvious that employer-sponsored group insurance continues to be the main source of coverage for the working population in this country. Every action we take should be judged in the context of helping that system to work better. We cannot follow policies that will undermine that market and set people adrift in the expensive and unresponsive individual market place. Yet many of the proposals of our Republican colleagues would do just that.

We don't need any more tax breaks for wealthy people. We don't need any more solutions based on an ideology of the free market that leaves 43.6 million Americans without health care. We need a commitment of our resources to provide people with health care coverage.

That means an aggressive effort to find and enroll the millions of children and adults who are eligible now but not enrolled in the programs we've got.

That means supporting and expanding public programs that we know work.

And that means taking every action we can to keep employer-sponsored group coverage available and affordable.

No American should be without health insurance coverage. That is my belief and a bedrock belief of Democrats. This hearing today says loud and clear that we intend to see action.