

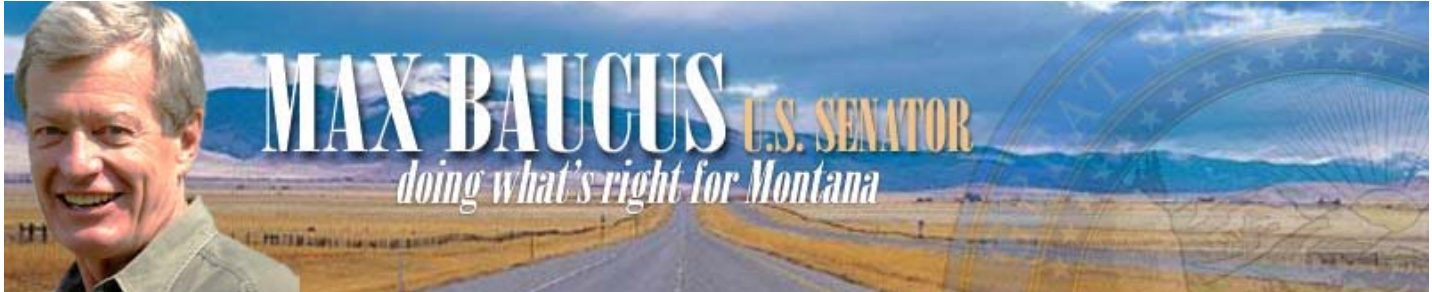


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Health Care Reform and You

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To My Fellow Montanans:

Last year I was in Havre holding a listening session as we started to lay the ground work for meaningful health care reform. When I was up there, I heard from a couple whose son had been in a very bad accident. For years they had battled obstacle after obstacle trying to find treatment and rehabilitation for him. And as I sat there and listened to their story, and similar stories from other residents, I knew we must act. We must reform health care.

Health care reform. I am sure you have all heard that phrase in the last weeks and months. Whether it is advertisements on TV, articles in the newspapers, or talking with your friends and neighbors, health care reform seems to be everywhere. Even the President of the United States is focusing on Montana to talk about this important issue.

With all this information swirling around, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk directly to you. To tell you more in depth about what has been going on in Washington, how health care reform is shaping up and what it means for you and those you care about.

Health care reform is the single largest legislative challenge that I've ever experienced. It is a once in a generation opportunity, and that is why we are working diligently to make sure we get it right.

Unfortunately, because it's so big and complex, it is often misunderstood, misrepresented, and subject to misinformation.

I want to address some of the concerns, dispel some of the myths and highlight some of the benefits of what health care reform really means.

To start off, why do we need health care reform? Why should we tackle such a big problem? The answer is simple: if we don't act now, our economy will continue to be paralyzed by out of control health care costs. Family budgets will be consumed with paying for health care, and millions of people will fall victim to medical tragedies because they can't access the care they need and deserve.

The next logical question is what does health care reform mean for Montana? How will reform affect you and those you love?

For the thousands of Montanans without coverage, or barely able to afford the care they have, it is clear what health care reform means. Those folks are scared that one accident, one illness, could wipe out their life savings. Reforms means having access to quality, affordable health care so you no longer have to lay awake at night, praying that your child doesn't get a fever. It means that you no longer have to choose between a trip to the pharmacy and a trip to the grocery store.

But, for many of you whom I have talked with, you are happy with your health care. You have a doctor you like, you get regular check ups, and so you feel like you don't really have a stake in any type of reform efforts. Yet, let me be crystal clear, we ALL have a stake in health care reform.

Health care reform means lower costs for everybody: Right now the average Montana family pays an extra \$2,100 a year for their health care premiums because of the broken health care system.

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By reforming the system, folks won't be hit with this hidden tax every year. Additionally, if we can provide some commonsense tax incentives to provide health care, we can really take a burden off many of our small businesses.

- Health care reform means higher quality for everybody: Montana is a rural state. We are proud of our communities, and many of us have roots going back one hundred years or more. But this also produces a lot of challenges, especially regarding health care. That is why I've worked so hard to promote things like improving health care technology, so when folks go to see their doctor in Havre, they can have access to the most cutting edge medical care.

- Health care reform means greater access for everybody: Across our state, we are seeing a shortage when it comes to primary care doctors, especially in rural areas. These are the doctors that we go to for our regular check-ups and usually the first people we see when we're feeling sick. I want to make sure that we are taking care of these folks, because they provide a great service to our rural communities.

Yet, I know that many of you still have concerns about health care. The most passionate concerns I hear usually revolve around the government's involvement with health care. Some people feel that there is not enough government involvement in health care, and they want a single payer type system. Others feel that there is too much government involvement in health care, and they want to eliminate government health care programs and only have private care.

To those who expressed those concerns, I want you to know I am listening. I understand where you are coming from. I recognize the merits of both these arguments, and I have used these viewpoints to help shape the current health care debate. After listening to both sides, meeting with advocates of both viewpoints, it is clear that the answer lies somewhere in between. Some have begun calling it a uniquely American solution to the health care crisis that combines both public and private care.

While some decry government involvement in health care, certainly we can all agree that programs like the Children's Health Insurance Program, which provides health care to low-income children, and Medicare, which provides care to our seniors, are good things. Programs like these should be strengthened so our children and seniors don't have to worry about whether they will get their next immunization or be able to fill their next prescription.

And to those who call for a completely government run system, surely we can say that for those who have private coverage that they like, who have a doctor that they like, they should be able to keep that. That we shouldn't eliminate the health insurance plans that thousands of Montanans currently have, and are satisfied with.

Secondly, there are hundreds of myths floating around about what health care reform will mean. I hear them all the time when I talk with Montanans. Max, they say, are you really going to cut Medicare benefits for seniors? Absolutely not. Am I going to have to change health care insurance I currently have? No way. Will this lead to rationed care? No!

Let me clear about several things:

- We will NOT cut Medicare benefits. Too many seniors rely on this program to ever jeopardize their coverage.
- We will NOT force you to change your current health care. I have said from the beginning, if you like what you have you can keep it.
- We will NOT start rationing health care. If anything, we will do just the opposite. We are working to make care more available, and more affordable.

These are just a few of the things that I wanted to talk about with you when it comes to health care. I know many of you have questions about all of this. I know many of you have heard rumors or seen ads about what health care reform means. I want to provide answers to your questions.

Me and my staff are here to serve you. We want to continue a productive dialogue so we can let you know what we are working on, and you can tell us what is working and what isn't.

As we move forward, I hope you will join us as we fight to reform our health care system, because the bottom line is that health care reform affects us all.

Very best wishes!
Max Baucus

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