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Group Calls for Universal Health Coverage

By KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) -- The federal government should guarantee that all Americans have basic health insurance coverage, says a committee set up by Congress to find out what people want when it comes to health care.

"Assuring health care is a shared social responsibility," says the interim report of the Citizens' Health Care Working

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Group, a 14-member committee that went to 50 communities and heard from 23,000 people.

The committee describes its recommendations as a framework. The recommendations don't say who would pay for universal health coverage or how much it would cost. The concept of government-guaranteed coverage runs counter to the Bush administration's position that consumers should bear more responsibility for their initial medical expenses.

The group's findings will be officially presented to the president and Congress in the fall, but first comes 90 days of public comment. The president will submit to Congress his response, and then five congressional committees will hold hearings.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he and Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, came up with the idea for establishing a group that would work outside of Washington to find out what Americans want. He said they were tired of years of gridlock on health care issues.

"We decided, let's try something else. Let's go to the public and give them a chance, not in terms of writing a bill, but let them provide a kind of general roadmap where the country ought to head," Wyden said.

Wyden said he will wait to hear the public's comments on the report before reaching any conclusions about the findings. However, some groups are already wary.

"It implies massive new funding sources, massive new laws would be needed," said Sarah Berk, executive director of Health Care America, an advocacy group that pushes free market approaches to health coverage. "We want universal access, but this report just pushes all the difficult problems onto somebody else's plate. It says government needs to do it all."

George Grob, the executive director of the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, said the group was not asked to say specifically how to get to universal coverage. However, the group did recommend that financing strategies be based on principles of fairness and shared

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responsibility. The strategies should draw on revenue streams such as enrollee contributions, income taxes, so-called "sin taxes" and payroll taxes, the report said.

"We're already paying for health care for everybody who gets it, including people who don't have health insurance coverage who are taken care of when they go to the hospital," Grob said.

Advocates of universal coverage said the group's goals were an important reminder of what the public wants.

"But I'm not sure it moves the ball downfield in terms of figuring out precisely how that should be done," said Ron Pollack, executive director of Families USA.

The group's stated values and principals were as important as the recommendations, Grob said. Those principals said all Americans should have a set of health coverage benefits guaranteed by law. Those benefits should be "portable and independent of health status, working status, age (and) income," the report said.

Congress passed the bill creating the Citizens' Health Care Working Group in late 2003. The same bill created a prescription drug benefit under Medicare. Congress approved \$5.5 million to fund the group's work, which began in February of last year. The group consisted of 14 members representing consumers, the disabled, business and labor, and health care providers.

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