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Group recommends that government provide basic health care

Debate begins: Findings will be presented to the president and Congress this fall

By Carey Hamilton
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Many Americans agree that health care should be universal. Achieving that lofty goal is where the debate begins.

When Hilary Clinton proposed health care for everyone in the '90s, she caused a major stir. Now, a group formed by Congress is taking on the thorny issue.

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group, a 14-member committee that went to 50 communities - including a May trip to Utah - and heard from 23,000 people, says in an interim report released June 1 that the federal government should guarantee Americans have basic health insurance coverage.

"Assuring health care is a shared social responsibility," the report states.

It doesn't say who would pay for universal health coverage or how much it would cost.

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

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, say they envisioned a group that would work outside of Washington to find out what Americans want, after years of gridlock on health care issues.

George Grob, the group's executive director, said it was not asked to specify how to establish universal coverage. But the group recommended that financing be based on principles of fairness and draw on revenue from sources that include enrollee contributions, income taxes, so-called "sin taxes" and payroll taxes.

"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.

Brent James, a Salt Lake City doctor and vice president of Intermountain Healthcare, is one of the 14 members. He said providing universal health care could be the top issue in the 2008 presidential election.

Policy makers need to act on the public's suggestions, he said.

"Have we solved the problem? No," James said. "Have we established the form in which the problem could get solved? Yes, we have. And let the debate begin."

The group offers these guidelines as a launching pad, James said.

- The federal government should guarantee Americans' health care coverage. To be debated: what benefits are provided.
- Coverage in the U.S. is too costly. Providers need to reduce mistakes and waste and improve quality. For this, electronic medical records are needed.

- The government needs to prevent any American from being bankrupted by health care costs.

"We need to agree on a common level of services," James said. "That would be a huge key step, and it has a great amount of support across the country."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

Contact Carey Hamilton at [**chamilton@sltrib.com**](mailto:chamilton@sltrib.com) or at 801-257-8605. Send comments to [**livingeditor@sltrib.com**](mailto:livingeditor@sltrib.com).