

2008 PRESIDENTIAL RACE: UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE

Governor's solution: Mandatory coverage

Expert says Richardson's \$100 billion proposal 'good' but not a standout

By Diana Del Mauro
The New Mexican

Gov. Bill Richardson on Tuesday fleshed out his \$100 billion national plan for universal health care, which contains a few unique features but fails to set him far apart from the other Democratic presidential candidates, according to one analyst.

"I think it's a very sensible plan, but it doesn't differentiate him from the pack," Leif Wellington Haase, director of New America Foundation's California program

and former health care fellow at The Century Foundation, said in a telephone interview.

The New America Foundation supports universal coverage for the nation, with an ongoing but government-regulated role for commercial insurance companies. This approach seems to be rising to the top; all but one Democratic presidential candidate (Dennis Kucinich) is proposing public-private hybrid solutions.

"This is a very good proposal," Haase said of Richardson's solution, unveiled in Iowa. "The key thing is that all the Democratic candidates are proposing ambitious, serious, honest health care plans. And I think that is more important than the specific details."

Please see **SOLUTION**, Page A-5



Charles Rex Arbogast/The Associated Press

Gov. Bill Richardson, shown Tuesday during a forum hosted by the AFL-CIO in Chicago, earlier unveiled a universal health care plan that combines public and private coverage.

INSIDE: Crossfire misses Richardson. **Page A-4**
Roundup of governor's campaign. **Page C-3**

Solution: Not 'socialized medicine'

Continued from Page A-1

Richardson's platform won't please people who want European-style socialized medicine. His universal health care proposal revolves around choice for the American public without raising taxes.

He would create "affordable" options by letting working families buy the insurance plan that members of Congress enjoy, expanding Medicare for Americans in the 55-64 age group, building on existing programs for the poor and allowing children to piggyback off their parents' coverage for a longer period of time.

Every American would be required to obtain coverage — but pay 10 percent less for private coverage.

"Like John Edwards, he has mandated individual coverage in his plan, which Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton haven't included," Haase said.

Other highlights of Richardson's philosophy are tax credits for people who purchase their own insurance and reasonable interest rates on medical bills charged to credit cards.

He addresses the high level of risk that makes people uncomfortable with the current medical system, Haase said, but it's hard to predict how much relief either idea would actually bring the public.

To offset the estimated \$104 billion-\$110 billion cost per year of his plan, Richardson would reduce inefficiencies through technology, cut medical expenses through preventive care, lower prescription drug prices and shrink the amount of uncompensated care by requiring insurance companies to cover people with pre-existing medical conditions.

Richardson might be overly optimistic about the savings that could be achieved by cutting down on bureaucratic inefficiencies, Haase said.

"In reality, there may not be quite as much to save, and even what is saved is hard to do politically," he said.

Also, letting ordinary people buy into the insurance plan for federal workers sounds good, "but the practical details of how that would work might be much harder than people expect," Haase said.

The only plans that will work in America are ones that control the growth of medical costs over time, Haase argues.

Richardson calls for medicine that's grounded in scientific evidence and paying health care providers based on their results with patients — something Haase calls "admirable" and critical to reform.

Back at home, meanwhile, another nonprofit think tank put pressure on Richardson to take action here.

"New Mexico Voices for Children looks forward to learning more about the governor's recently announced national health care proposal and how it relates to ongoing efforts at reforming health care here in New Mexico," executive director Eric Griego said in a pointed news release.

"While national health care reform is optimal, New Mexico's health care crisis is now," he added, "and we will continue to work with our state's leaders for a health-care system that protects every New Mexican."

Dozens of states are pursuing universal health coverage. In more than four years as governor, Richardson hasn't yet

championed universal health coverage during the New Mexico Legislature (though he plans to in 2008).

Haase said he doesn't consider it "hypocritical" that Richardson has made it part of his presidential campaign platform.

"It's much harder to sustain universal coverage at the state

level," Haase said, adding that risk pools are much larger at the national level, and the federal government can better adjust for ups and downs in the revenue cycle.

Contact Diana Del Mauro at 986-3066 or dianadm@sfnewmexican.com.