

Silver City Sun-  
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From Page:  
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## Let's do it! Time for health-care reform is now

Our nation's health insurance system has been in a death spiral for years, and the trajectory is only going to get steeper. Blue Cross Blue Shield of New Mexico recently announced that it wants to increase its premiums for individual health plans by an average of more than 20 percent. This follows the news from California, where Anthem Blue Cross wants to increase premiums by up to nearly 40 percent.

It's a vicious cycle. As health insurance prices go up, fewer people are able to afford their premiums and more drop their insurance. As more people drop their insurance, prices go up.

What's more, the healthier people tend to drop out first because they have fewer health-care needs than people with chronic conditions. Having fewer healthy people in the insurance pool drives prices up further, causing more people to drop out. It's not just a vicious cycle, it's also unsustainable.

This has been happening right here at home. New Mexico has the second-highest rate in the country of people without health insurance, and it has also seen some of the highest insurance rate increases of any state.

Insurance is all about pooling risk. The more people you have in the pool, the more people you have to share the risk. That way, when one person suffers a big loss — they get a cancer diagnosis or they are badly injured in an accident — the shared loss is manageable.

One problem with our current health-insurance system is that millions of Americans are not in the pool.

In Doña Ana County, almost one-third of the population under age

**Nick  
Estes**



65 are not insured, so are not in the risk pool. Health reform will bring most of those individuals into the pool, providing financial assistance for those who need it to help pay the premiums and tax credits

to help small-business owners offer insurance to their employees.

This will not only help the many families and individuals in Doña Ana County and New Mexico who can't afford health insurance now, but will help stabilize prices as insurance pools grow to cover a larger share of both healthy folks and folks who need more care.

This is just one of the many reasons we need Congress to pass health-care reform. The legislation

they are currently considering will not change the way you receive health care. You'll be able to keep your doctor and your current plan. What it will do is make the system work better for everyone.

Another problem with our current system is that health-insurance companies don't have much competition. Free enterprise depends on competition to keep costs down and quality up. In many parts of the U.S. — New Mexico included — there are only a handful of insurance companies from which to choose.

Companies don't have to work very hard to earn your business when they control so much of the market.

Health-care reform will promote competition by establishing insurance exchanges. Not only will this give people more choice, it will also make it easier to shop around. Insurance companies will have to present information about their plans in a clear, user-friendly format that will allow consumers to evaluate the various plans, see how much they really cost, what they cover and don't cover, what the deductibles are, etc. Then New Mexico's small businesses and individuals who don't have insurance can choose the plan that's right for them from the various companies competing for their business.

Health-care reform will also put some much-needed consumer protections in place.

Today, insurance companies can refuse to do business with you because of your health status. We don't allow this kind of discrimination on any other grounds. Companies cannot refuse to do business with you because of your race, religion, gender, etc., yet you can be refused insurance if you were, for example, born with epilepsy.

This is outrageous and it will no longer be legal after health-care reform is enacted.

Reform will also stop the practice of "rescission" — that's when an insurance company cancels your policy because you get sick, even after you've been conscientiously paying your premiums for years.

More than 470,000 New Mexicans don't have any kind of health insurance, including almost 60,000 in Doña Ana County alone. The majority of these individuals are working full-time, but are employed by companies that can't afford health insurance.

These New Mexicans often do not get the preventive care they need to stay healthy or the prescriptions they need to manage chronic conditions, and they live with the grim reality that medical bills could drive them into bankruptcy (Almost two-thirds of all





bankruptcies are caused, at least in part, by unmanageable medical bills.). Health-care reform will get most of them covered.

For all these reasons, health-care reform will mean a huge improvement in the lives of ordinary people all over New Mexico and the country.

Health-care reform will be the most significant legislation to pass

Congress in 40 years. Let's get it done and provide affordable, quality health care for all New Mexicans.

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**Nick Estes is a health-policy analyst with the New Mexico Voices for Children. This column was distributed by the League of Women Voters.**

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