

# Plenty of reasons to be optimistic about health care reform in '09

As we face two wars and one of the worst economic downturns in our history, some might assume health reform will take a back seat to the other crises we face. Rather than

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patiently waiting for a more hospitable policy climate, though, we propose that health care reform is in fact integral to our nation's economic recovery.

Health reform efforts have been tried for decades, failing every time. Why, then, should we feel optimistic?

People. The policy signals that President-elect Obama is sending through his choices of advisers and Cabinet members are reasons for hope. Tom Daschle, who will lead the Department of Health and Human Services, is a former senator who understands how Washington works — and is a believer in the power of prevention and public health.

President-elect Obama chose Peter Orszag to lead the Office of Management and Budget. Orszag is a rare expert on health policy in general and health care reform in particular and he is an economist. Orszag's analysis shows that health care reform is critical to economic recovery and shouldn't be delayed or watered down. Indeed, health care costs are one of the causes of the mess we're in — from the automakers' financial straits to personal bankruptcies among people who lack insurance and can't afford the astronomical costs of life-saving care.

**ECONOMIC IMPACT:** Similarly, economist Jonathan Gruber, who teaches at M.I.T., recently published an op-ed in The New York Times detailing the many ways health reform could accelerate an economic recovery. For example, by giving states more funds to enroll people in Medicaid (Medi-Cal, in California) or the State Children's Insurance Program (SCHIP, known as Healthy Families in California), health reform

initiatives could be reinvested to cover more children and families, or they could free up state funds for spending on public works projects that create jobs.

Even more jobs could be created in the health information technology sector (where Obama has proposed investing \$50 billion in order to support more coordinated and higher quality care) and in primary care, for which there would be greater demand with expanded insurance coverage for children and adults.

**ALLIES:** Unlike the ill-fated 1994 effort, the incoming Obama administration has allies supporting health reform — not only senators Kennedy and Baucus, but the American Medical Association, insurers, employers, and others who were formerly opponents of reform.

**A FOCUS ON PREVENTION:** The Obama transition team understands that focusing on well-being rather than illness, giving children an active start in life, and supporting public health goals are all necessary to heal

this nation and truly make the investments in access to healthcare pay off.

**STATE SUPPORT:** States are eager for national leadership as well — but are not waiting for it. In California, Daryl Steinberg has announced that covering all California children will be a top priority. (In this regard, Santa Cruz has a significant head start with our Healthy Kids program, which enrolls low-income, uninsured children in one of several subsidized health insurance programs, leading to coverage of 98 percent of the county's kids.)

**LOCAL SUPPORT:** Just two weeks ago, when it looked like the Healthy Families program might have to institute a waiting list due to the current budget crisis, First 5 of California and many local First 5 Commissions stepped forward with funding so that wouldn't happen. We wish to thank First 5 of Santa Cruz County for swiftly contributing its share of funding so that no Santa Cruz County children would be

waiflisted for Healthy Families.

**YOUR VOICE MATTERS:** The Obama administration has invited communities across the country to host town halls to discuss health reform so that individuals can have a voice in the process. Here in Santa Cruz, Dominican Hospital will be hosting such a dialogue and all interested community members are invited. The meeting is Monday, Dec. 29 from 5-6:30 p.m. in the Education Center behind the hospital.

As the new year ushers in a new administration and policy climate, the members of HIP hope that 2009 will indeed be the year that a successful health reform effort is launched. We wish everyone in Santa Cruz County health and hope in 2009!

Alan McKay is the executive director of the Central Coast Alliance for Health, and Board President of the Health Improvement Partnership (HIP), a local collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders dedicated to improving access and building a stronger local health care system.