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Connecticut Needs Health Care Reform Now!

By Susan Bysiewicz

The true test of leadership is not just doing the easy thing when times are good, it's making the tough calls and doing the right thing when times are bad. This week, Governor Rell failed that test miserably.

In vetoing House Bill No. 6582, An Act Establishing the Connecticut Healthcare Partnership and House Bill No. 6600, An Act Concerning the Establishment of the SustiNet Plan, Governor Rell once again showed herself to be disengaged from one of the most important public policy issues to face our country for the last 25 years.

Governor, we don't need another commission to study the problem of health care. We know what the problem is and how to fix it. Here's how one public servant summed it up: "Opportunity for all means reforming the health care system to control costs, improve quality, expand preventive and long-term care, maintain consumer choice, and cover everybody." Those words were spoken by Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton on October 3, 1991.

In the ensuing 18 years, another 10 million Americans have joined the ranks of the uninsured, while health care costs are spiraling out of control. In Connecticut, 400,000 residents now lack health insurance and a recently released Families USA report found that 758,000 people went without health coverage in Connecticut at some time during the years of 2007-2008.

As Connecticut's chief Business Registrar, I see the results of the lack of affordable quality health insurance every day. I have traveled to every corner of Connecticut in the last two years holding roundtable discussions on health care with small business entrepreneurs. They have consistently told me that providing health coverage for their employees is both their highest cost and the largest drag on their profitability. These small business owners are the backbone of our economy; in fact, businesses with 50 employees or less are responsible for creating 90% of all new Connecticut jobs in the last decade. But with healthcare costs skyrocketing, many small business entrepreneurs face a dilemma: do I layoff valuable employees to provide some with health

insurance, or do I keep all of my employees but provide no health coverage?

The consequences of this choice are in plain sight. A 2007 Report issued by the Health Insurance Policy Council showed that over 52% of the uninsured in Connecticut are employees of small businesses and their families. More startling, in the first half of this year, nearly 7,000 businesses in Connecticut have shut their doors, which represents a 17% increase in business closures over last year's figure and a new record high for first half of any year since we first started recording these numbers in 2000.

To me, affordable quality health care is not only a right to which our citizens are entitled, but the numbers show it is also **the** catalyst to reviving our economy, growing companies, adding jobs, and retaining our highly skilled workforce. This is the 2nd year in a row that Governor Rell has vetoed meaningful health care reform legislation. I often wonder how many of the more than 20,000 businesses who shut down in Connecticut during that time might have been able to survive if they had the option of affordable, quality health care.

More than 24 states have passed laws opening up their state employee health insurance pool to employees at municipalities, public schools and even regional planning agencies. A handful of other states are looking at expanding these large pools to private sector entities like small businesses, realizing the millions of dollars in savings from spreading the risk among a large group of insured people. This is the smart, sensible approach of the CT Healthcare Partnership.

With her vetoes, Governor Rell has said "no" to being a leader on health care reform and said "yes" to billions more in profits for big health insurance companies. The governor has chosen to perpetuate the status quo: less preventative care and more expensive visits to the emergency room to deal with health crises. And who foots the bill for caring for the uninsured? We all do through increases in our health care premiums.

We don't have to take no for an answer. Call your legislator. Demand that they vote to override Governor Rell's short-sighted and ill-advised vetoes of the CT Healthcare Partnership and the Sustinet Plan. Governor, if you cannot show leadership on the critical issue of health care facing Connecticut's citizens, step aside, we will.

Susan Bysiewicz is Connecticut's Secretary of the State.