

Bush, Kerry eye health care

Nancy Frazier O'Brien/CNS

WASHINGTON — It's been more than a decade since the U.S. Catholic bishops declared in their 1993 document "A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform" that the U.S. health-care system "serves too few and costs too much."

With more than 43 million uninsured Americans, the trend has gone in the direction of serving fewer and costing more.

Both President Bush and Democratic Sen. John F. Kerry have outlined detailed plans for expanding access to affordable health care, protecting and strengthening Medicare, reforming medical liability law and reducing health-care costs.

Bush's plan focuses on expansion of a network of community health centers to serve low-income Americans; establishment of tax-free health savings accounts to pay out-of-pocket health costs; refundable tax credits to help workers buy health insurance; introduction of a prescription-drug benefit for seniors through Medicare; formation of association health plans that would allow small businesses to band together for lowered insurance rates; and

"common-sense reform to medical liability law" that would reduce "frivolous ... legal proceedings against doctors and health care providers."

Kerry's health-care reform proposal includes a federal guarantee to pay the full cost of more than 20 million children enrolled in Medicaid if states agree to expand coverage to children living at 300 percent of the federal poverty level and to the family members of children living at up to 200 percent of the poverty level. The plan would provide insurance to more than 18 million children and adults currently uninsured, according to the Kerry campaign.

Kerry also has proposed the creation of a "premium rebate" pool that would reimburse employee health plans a portion of the cost of care in certain high-risk health cases as long as companies use the savings to reduce the cost of workers' premiums. He would give all Americans access to the same health-care plan that covers Congress and the president, offer small-business owners refundable tax credits for up to 50 percent of the cost of insuring their workers, and reduce prescription-drug costs by closing loopholes in patent laws.

Kenneth Thorpe, chairman of the

department of health policy and management at Emory University in Atlanta, recently estimated that Bush's proposal would cost about \$90 billion over 10 years and would provide coverage for 2.5 million people currently uninsured. Kerry's plan would cost an about \$690 billion over 10 years and would add 27 million people to the ranks of the insured.

The U.S. bishops outlined their hopes for health-care reform in the 2003 document, "Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility."

"This reform must be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life, and meet the needs of the poor and uninsured," they said. "With tens of millions of Americans lacking basic health insurance, we support measures to ensure that decent health care is available to all as a moral imperative. We also support measures to strengthen Medicare and Medicaid as well as measures that extend health care coverage to children, pregnant women, workers, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations."

Speaking June 8 at the Catholic Health Association's annual assembly in Chicago, pollster Celinda Lake



Karen Callaway/CNS

In a recent Gallup poll, an overwhelming number of American adults say health care was an important election-year issue.

said health care still lags behind the economy and the war in Iraq as issues of importance to voters.

She said health-care issues will be "more powerful" in the elections if "viewed through an economic lens" by voters. Most Americans are "flabbergasted" when they discover the number of children and working adults who lack insurance, she said.

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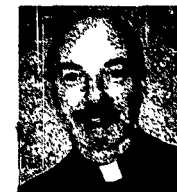
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