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Penning those words recognizing that good health is essential to the prosperity of the American people,

During periods of economic downturn and stagnation in history, however, Americans' health has often been among the first casualties. Today, with skyrocketing health-care costs and financial woes affecting both Main Street and Wall Street, people urgently need access to high quality, affordable medical care.

Currently, the United States spends $1 out of every $6 on health care—twice as much as any other nation—but ranks only 47th in life expectancy and 37th on a World Health Organization study of the performance of national health systems.

Furthermore, Americans get the right treatment only 55 percent of the time. Some businesses report paying more for their employees' health-care costs than on the payroll itself or manufacturing.

With growing numbers of unemployed and uninsured, Emergency rooms remind us that America's health and its wealth are intricately entwined. That is, only with the election just two days away, Americans need to know how the presidential candidates plan to ensure our nation's broken health-care system.

While both candidates emphasize the importance of prevention, disease management, comparative effectiveness research, more reporting of quality and price data as well as the incorporation of health information technology in their plans, Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama otherwise have very different visions and solutions for the future of the

U.S. health-care system.

Mr. McCain's plan emphasizes that consumers should have more personal control over their health-care dollars and the care they receive. Mr. Obama envisions shared responsibility among individuals, businesses and government to ensure all Americans have access to quality health care.

Mr. McCain's plan aims to level the playing field between the individual and employer-based insurance markets by removing tax incentives that favor individual obtains insurance through their workplace. Under the McCain plan, tax deducts for businesses will remain largely unchanged. However, for the 16.1 million Americans who obtain coverage through their employers, health benefits would become part of their taxable income.

To offset this tax increase, Mr. McCain would provide a refundable tax credit of $2,500 to individuals and $3,500 to families, paid for, in part, by decreasing waste and fraud in Medicare and Medicaid and as a result of market forces that he believes could drive down costs. These credits would assist some uninsured people obtain coverage and subsidize premiums for those with existing insurance plans.

While these tax credits may benefit the relatively healthy individuals in the individual market, those in poor health and with pre-existing conditions would face an affordable premium if in sufficient coverage—may be

relegated to underfunded state high risk pools.

Another concern is that Mr. McCain's tax credits are not designed to adjust to rising premiums. In the short term, these credits may boost coverage in the individual market. However, if premiums continue to grow faster than wages, more Americans may face unaffordable coverage.

Additionally, Mr. McCain's proposal permits people to purchase health plans across state lines to promote competition and insurance portability. Mr. McCain, however, does not specify how these plans would be regulated, which could significantly impact our nation's health as financial market deregulation has destabilized our economy.

Mr. Obama takes a very different approach to health-care reform. A key component of Mr. Obama's plan is to extend comprehensive coverage by creating a new federal employer mandate for employers. Eligibility regardless of pre-existing conditions, sets premiums independent of health status, and provides a wide range of private insurance options similar to what federal employees and their families have.

Americans may choose among the plans offered in the NIHE or keep their current coverage. Mr. Obama's proposal provides subsidies for individuals and families who cannot afford to purchase insurance, including 17 million children, and expands eligibility for public programs including Medicaid and SCHIP. While some experts believe reform could be expensive, Mr. Obama's plan sets a standard for all American citizens to obtain health insurance.

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