

Rick Abrams: Baldwin: Wisconsin's health care advocate at a critical time

Posted on Friday, Nov 5, 2021

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I have the honor of serving the good people of Wisconsin and supporting the health care heroes working across our state by advocating for the interests of Wisconsin's long-term care provider community and the residents they serve. The Wisconsin Health Care Association and Wisconsin Center for Assisted Living (WHCA/WiCAL) is Wisconsin's most representative association of post-acute care facilities, from skilled nursing facilities to therapy centers to assisted living centers.

As I write this piece, Congress begins debate on the budget reconciliation framework that President Biden has proposed. A critically important provision within the legislation would extend the Affordable Care Act (ACA) health insurance subsidies for three years. I urge Senator Baldwin to do what she can to have the legislation amended to make these life-saving subsidies permanent.

We need leaders in Washington who are committed to improving our nation's health care system so more Americans can access the care they need. Senator Tammy Baldwin is one of them and, as a health care advocate, I have long admired her support for expanding health care coverage for people in need. As negotiations for budget reconciliation enter the final hours, it is important that we remember the urgency and importance of this colossal issue — and I recently wrote to Senator Baldwin asking her to do just that. The evidence is crystal clear: If a person has health insurance, she/he is imminently more likely to access necessary care at the right time, and in the most cost effective, least restrictive environment. There is no question that this is sound public policy.

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We have made considerable progress in the decade since the federal insurance marketplace was created — progress built upon when Congress passed the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and expanded federal subsidies that help millions purchase insurance. However, these expanded subsidies are temporary and will expire next year if Congress does not act swiftly. If the current marketplace tax credits are not made permanent, 51,900 uninsured Wisconsinites could lose their opportunity to purchase affordable coverage. On behalf of the health care providers I represent, our employees and our patients, I asked Senator Tammy Baldwin to do what she can to make those subsidies permanent in this year's budget.

Making the health insurance premium subsidies permanent would be a great help to our front-line health care heroes who either are providing direct patient care or are providing important dietary, infection control and housekeeping support services. Many of these folks are women, minorities and/or single parents. While many long-term care facilities provide health insurance to their employees and their families, other facilities either do not have the wherewithal to do so or must require the employee to shoulder a sizeable portion of the coverage. For the latter group of employees and their families, the federal health insurance marketplace premium subsidies make the difference between having critical health insurance coverage or not.

It was former Vice President and Senator Hubert H. Humphrey who famously stated, "It was once said that the moral test of government is how that government treats those in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; and those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy and the handicapped." By extending the ACA health insurance subsidies, Congress, indeed our great country, will famously pass the moral test about which Vice President Humphrey so eloquently spoke. The three years currently in the pending federal budget reconciliation bill framework is a great start but more needs to be done NOW. We need to make the subsidies permanent!

Senator Baldwin, thank you for all that you continue to do. Once again, I respectfully ask you to do whatever you can to make these subsidies permanent.

- Abrams is the president and CEO of Wisconsin Health Care Association, Wisconsin Center for Assisted Living.