

Health care is a moral, economic imperative

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Last week's historic ruling by the Supreme Court on constitutionality of the Affordable Care Act marks a significant milestone in our nation's efforts to improve the financing and delivery of health services in the U.S.

The high court upheld President Obama's signature legislative accomplishment, affirming the ACA's mandate that nearly all Americans carry coverage and retaining sweeping changes to the health industry. The decision also allows long-overdue changes to preventive care and investments in public health services made possible by the law to move forward without question or any further delay.

At its core, the ACA embodies both a moral imperative that views access to health care as a fundamental human right and an equally important economic imperative to "bend the health care cost curve" and reign in unsustainable health spending. Despite formidable political and legal challenges, efforts to address those twin imperatives can now proceed.

It's worth recalling that, in the year prior to the ACA's passage, 24 percent of Nevada residents under the age of 65 lacked health insurance coverage – in Washoe County alone, 86,000 adults lacked health insurance in 2009. Likewise, in the decade preceding the law's implementation, most of the wage gains made by Nevada workers were erased by soaring health insurance premiums and out-of-pocket health care costs. Presently, the average health care costs for a family of four exceeds \$20,000.

In Nevada, Republican lawmakers and members of our Congressional delegation have been unified in their opposition to all things Obama, including the Affordable Care Act. With the constitutionality of the ACA now settled, political debates must no longer focus on whether, but how best to implement the health reform law.

Over the past two years and to his credit, Governor Sandoval's administration has quietly utilized federal grant funds totaling \$24.7 million to plan and establish the Silver State Health Insurance Exchange and to prepare for increased Medicaid enrollment associated with law's coverage expansions. Nevada has also invested \$7.5 million from the ACA-authorized "Prevention and Public Health Fund" into our state's crumbling and grossly underfunded public health infrastructure – investments in clinical and community-based prevention, workforce development, public health preparedness, and the health care safety net that our tax-averse legislature has been incapable of making in even the best of economic times.

The Supreme Court's affirmation of the Affordable Care Act last week will do little to resolve political battle lines drawn since the day reform was signed into law by President Obama a couple of years ago. Indeed, the court's narrow 5-4 majority is itself a reflection of our highly polarized politics and the associated inability of national policymakers to agree on the big solutions demanded by the big issues facing our country.

As was the case with the passage of Medicare and Medicaid over a half-century ago, political acrimony and divided public opinion will eventually give way to a recognition that our most intractable national problems of health care access and costs often require a federal solution. By affirming Congress's authority to address the challenges, the Supreme Court's decision finally allows us to roll up our sleeves and work together to realize the full potential of the law.

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