

Obama's landmark achievement

Reno Gazette-Journal / RGJ.COM

Sunday, November 4, 2012

"Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhuman." – Martin Luther King, Jr.

This Tuesday I will cast my ballot to re-elect President Obama. My principal reason is the President's unwavering commitment to universal health insurance coverage and improved access to health care for the least fortunate among us.

In its recent endorsement of Republican Mitt Romney for President, the RGJ editorial board claimed that the President's early focus on health insurance reform represented "misplaced priorities" and a wasted opportunity to address the economic woes faced by states, like Nevada, hardest hit by the recession and mortgage foreclosure crisis.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The board's argument suffers from the presumption that President Obama is incapable of walking and chewing gum at the same. In fact, in his first term, not only was President Obama able to shepherd and sign into law the most meaningful expansion of health insurance coverage in our country since the passage of Medicare and Medicaid in 1965, he ably steered our nation from the economic abyss and wound down the two budget-draining wars he inherited.

More importantly, the editors understate the urgency of the problems faced by the uninsured and how those problems are tied to the economic health of our state.

Currently, 587,000 Nevadans or 25 percent of the nonelderly population in our state lack health insurance coverage – these individuals not only face the obvious barriers in accessing health care when they need it, they are more likely than those with coverage to exhaust their savings or go into debt to pay for care.

Nevada also continues to have the highest rate of uninsured kids – currently 107,000 kids or 16.2 percent of the children in our state lack health insurance coverage. This unacceptable situation not only jeopardizes the immediate health of our children, it threatens the educational and thus economic prospects of the next generation of Nevada workers.

Finally, Nevada currently possesses the highest percentage of uninsured residents under 139 percent of the federal poverty level – that is to say, 242,000 low-income Nevadans who stand to gain coverage if Nevada elects to participate in the ACA-related Medicaid expansion beginning in 2014. The majority of these individuals are either too poor to purchase coverage or

work in small businesses that do not provide an affordable options or simply don't offer health insurance.

The passage of the Affordable Care Act won't solve any of these problems overnight, but it remains an important step forward for the public's health and the health of our state's economy.

At the end of the day, the two presidential candidates are distinguished by fundamentally different views on the role of the federal government as the guarantor of affordable access to health insurance. As for the moral and economic imperative of expanding health insurance coverage, there could not be a clearer choice this Tuesday.

John Packham, PhD is Director of Health Policy Research at the University of Nevada School of Medicine and President of the Nevada Public Health Association.