The John C. Stennis Institute of Government

THE VIEW

Issue #20 October 5, 2009

IS HEALTH CARE HEADED TO THE STATES?

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

It is with great care that I have avoided the dicey topic of health care reform. That is so for a number of reasons. First, the entire subject has evolved into a major wedge issue in the protracted partisan political wars. Secondly, the recession and the growing threats to peace and stability in the world emanating from Iraq, across Iran, through Afghanistan and into Pakistan present plenty to think about without adding a revamp of the nation's health care system. But probably the biggest reason to dodge the discussion of health care reform is that I still do not understand enough about the issue to offer much in the way of information.

A few days ago, Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington State got my attention. Senator Cantwell proposed an alternative to the famous or infamous "public option" designed to offer a government funded entity to compete with private insurance companies. Her idea was to simply give a sum of money to each state and let them use that to negotiate with insurance providers for coverage of the citizens of each respective state. My fascination with federalism gets the best of me any time that anyone in Washington suggests passing something down to the states. Often it is made to sound as though Uncle Sam is doing a favor for his nephews, the states, when it is really the responsibility of carrying the load at the federal level that they wish to "get shed of" as the old saying goes.

At any rate, Senator Cantwell's proposal sent me on a mission to refresh my memory about the health of Mississippi – both fiscally and physically – in case the states would indeed be required to enter into negotiations to provide health care to their citizens. In the event that Senator Cantwell's proposal gained traction somewhere on the long road ahead, how would Mississippi fare? A key provision in the Cantwell plan is that it would apply to those at 133% to 200% of the federal poverty level.

Mississippi's median household income sits at number 50 among the states, barely edging past West Virginia at $37,790, according to recent U.S. Census reports. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of uninsured Mississippians increased from 447,000 in 2001 to 519,000 in 2008. The number of Mississippians with employer-based coverage decreased from 61% to 56.6% during that same 2001 to 2008 time

period. Mississippi solidified its position as the nation's most obese state in 2008, continuing the paradox of being the poorest, yet fattest, state in the union. Significant in this regard is that our peers in the top 9 most obese states are all of our fellow states from the old Confederacy. Furthermore, as one might expect, Mississippi also maintained its hold on the number 50 spot in the race for the prize as the healthiest state award. This was affirmed by a report in *BuinessWeek Magazine* a couple of years ago that ranked the states by life expectancy. Mississippi came in 50th at 73.6 years compared to 1st place Hawaii at 80 years and 2nd place Minnesota at 78.8 years.

In a report by *Kaiser Health Facts* it was revealed that health statistics were uniformly direr in non-metropolitan areas than they were in metropolitan areas. This was certainly the case with Mississippi which, by the way, takes the prize for having the largest non-metropolitan population in the country. The list could go on, but the picture is fairly clear. As Washington begins to longingly cast its gaze toward the states to pull the country out of the health care dilemma, what shape will Mississippi be in to join the fray?

Last week's state news reminded us all that we are facing potentially uncharted waters as far as the depth of budget deficits is concerned. Furthermore, the faint of heart certainly would not want to peak beneath the stimulus package curtain to see what condition Medicare and Medicaid would be in were they not temporarily hidden from view. Questions abound for Mississippians just as they do for others in the country. With the increasing numbers of uninsured and underinsured, can we abide the status quo? Can we financially afford to get in the game as the negotiator of last resort for our Mississippi citizens? Given the forgoing statistics, what price tag would an insurance actuary worth his/her salt put on the value of providing health care for Mississippi's citizens? Or finally will the federal government come through yet again and shoulder the burden for us?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's email is marty@sig.msstate.edu.

ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:

Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

Mississippi State UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.