

Kathleen Sebelius: The Affordable Care Act has made the U.S. health-care system stronger

By Kathleen Sebelius

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The Supreme Court decision upholding the Affordable Care Act was a turning point in the health-care debate, a chance to stop refigting old political battles and move forward with implementing and improving a law that is already lowering health-care costs and providing more security for millions of American families. Instead, congressional Republicans will spend Wednesday staging yet another repeal vote.

Fortunately for those Americans whose health and finances depend on protections in the law, the vote is only symbolic. But it's worth setting the record straight about some false claims that have recently resurfaced.

One claim is that the Affordable Care Act is driving up Americans' health-care costs. The facts tell a different story.

In the decade before the law was passed, national health expenditures increased about 7 percent a year. But in the past two years, those increases have dropped to less than 4 percent per year, saving Americans more than \$220 billion. And that trend is expected to continue, with health-care costs projected to stay level as a share of gross domestic product from 2009 all the way through 2013.

You can see the same trend with premiums. Between 2000 and 2009, the average family premium more than doubled, from \$6,438 to \$13,375, an annual increase of 8.1 percent. From 2009 to 2011, family premiums still rose — but at a rate 25 percent lower. That generated savings of more than \$1,200 per family, a trend of lower premium increases that independent experts such as Mercer, the human resources consultant, and the nonprofit National Business Group on Health project will continue. And the law will provide even more relief in the years to come, including a tax cut averaging \$4,000 for 18 million middle-class Americans — a tax break that repeal would eliminate.

Another falsehood repeated by opponents of the law is that it is putting a greater burden on small businesses. Again, the facts show that the opposite is true.

Small-business owners were struggling in the health insurance market long before the law passed, spending an average of 18 percent more than their large competitors annually for health coverage and often seeing their insurance bills skyrocket if a single employee got sick. The result was that the number of small businesses in the United States offering coverage to employees was falling rapidly — from nearly 70 percent in 2000 to less than 60 percent of employers by 2009 — leaving millions of working families without coverage.

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Since the law passed, the share of small businesses offering employee coverage has held steady at 59 percent, the Kaiser Family Foundation has found, in part because new tax credits in the law are saving hundreds of thousands of small companies thousands of dollars each on their insurance costs. And independent experts such as Rand Corp. predict the number of employers offering coverage will rise in 2014 — just as it did in Massachusetts after health reform was passed — when small-business owners have the choice of shopping for health coverage in new competitive marketplaces.

A third false attack recycled in recent weeks is that the Affordable Care Act cuts Medicare benefits. In truth, Medicare is stronger than ever.

Thanks to the law, seniors have new benefits such as free preventive care as well as discounts on brand-name medications in the “doughnut hole” coverage gap that have already saved more than 5 million people with Medicare about \$600 each. Medicare Advantage premiums have fallen two years running. New crackdowns on fraud and abuse returned a record \$5.4 billion to Medicare in 2010 and 2011. And the health-care law has strengthened Medicare’s long-term outlook, adding eight additional years to the projected solvency of the Medicare trust fund.

Those calling for repeal have yet to propose credible ideas for lowering health-care costs. In fact, the same House Republicans who are voting Wednesday to repeal these Medicare savings voted to keep them in their budget in March.

People are entitled to their opinions, but not to their own facts. And the facts in this case are clear: Since the Affordable Care Act was passed, national health spending is rising at a slower rate, health insurance premiums are rising at a slower rate, small-business coverage is holding steady and Medicare is on a stronger financial footing.

Now that the Supreme Court has issued a decision, the American people would be better served if Congress joined the president in working to build on that progress, not undo it.

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