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## **Health Partnership Act is needed legislation**

By Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio

For too many years, I have listened to my colleagues on both sides of the aisle pontificate about the rising cost of health care and the growing number of uninsured Americans.

Yet, at the federal level, we have made little progress toward a solution for improving access to quality, affordable health care. We've simply used it as a political tool to win elections.

But this isn't about elections - it's about people's lives. I believe this is not only the greatest domestic challenge facing our nation, but is a major part of what is hurting our competitiveness in the global marketplace.

In 2005, spending on health care in the United States reached \$2 trillion - that's 16 percent of our GDP, which is the largest share ever. Yet, despite the increase in health care spending, some 47 million Americans had no health insurance at some point last year. This number has been steadily rising. In 2000, that number was 39.8 million. In 2002 it was 43.6 million.

These statistics are startling, and it is time we find a meaningful solution to the dilemma. That's why I have introduced the Health Partnership Act. The bill aims to break the logjam here in Washington by allowing states to experiment with various efforts to reduce the cost of health care and the number of uninsured, improve quality and access to care, and expand information technology.

This is not the first time we have faced these challenges or the first time I've tackled them head-on. As governor of Ohio, I had to work creatively to expand coverage and deal with increasing health care costs for a growing number of uninsured Ohioans. I am happy to report we were able to make some progress toward reducing the number of uninsured during my time in the governor's office.

We accomplished this by negotiating with the state unions to move to managed care and implementing the S-CHIP program to provide coverage for uninsured children. In fact, I recently learned from the Cuyahoga Commissioners that, in their county, 98 percent of eligible children are currently enrolled in this program. In addition, we controlled Medicaid costs to the point where from 1995 to 1998, due to good stewardship and management, Ohio ended up under-spending on Medicaid without harming families.

Like we did in Ohio, a number of states are already actively pursuing efforts to reduce the number of their residents who lack adequate health care coverage. My bipartisan Health Partnership Act will build on the goals of states like Massachusetts, California and others,

while providing a mechanism to analyze results and make recommendations for future action on the federal level.

Under my bill, Congress would authorize grants to individual states, groups of states, Indian tribes and organizations to carry out a broad range of strategies to improve our nation's health care delivery. The bill creates a mechanism for states to apply for grants to a bipartisan "State Health Innovation Commission" housed at the Department of Health and Human Services.

After reviewing the state proposals, the commission would submit to Congress a list of recommended state applications. The commission also would recommend the amount of federal grant money each state should receive to carry out the actions described in their plan.

Most importantly, at the end of the five-year period, the commission would be required to report to Congress whether the states are meeting the goals of the act and recommend future action Congress should take concerning overall reform, including whether or not to extend the program.

The Health Partnership Act has the support of approximately 90 national, state and local organizations, including the National Governors' Association (NGA), the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Physicians Alliance (NPA).

It is important we pass this legislation and provide a platform from which we can have a thoughtful conversation about health care reform at the federal level. Since I have been in the Senate, Congress has made some progress toward improving health care, most notably for our 43 million seniors with the passage of the Medicare Modernization Act.

Yet, we have been at this too long here in Washington without comprehensive, meaningful results. It is my hope that with bipartisan support, the Health Partnership Act will help us move closer toward a solution for the uninsured.