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New Poll Finds Disease Prevention is Top Priority for Americans in Health Reform

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Washington, D. C. – Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) released a new public opinion survey today which finds that Americans rank prevention as the most important health care reform priority, and overwhelmingly support increasing funding for prevention programs to reduce disease and keep people healthy.

In the poll, conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies, 70 percent of Americans ranked investing in prevention between an eight and 10 on a scale of zero to ten, where zero means not at all an important health care priority and 10 means very important. Forty-six percent rated prevention as a 10 out of 10. Overall, prevention was rated higher than all other proposals, including providing tax credits to small businesses and prohibiting health insurers from denying coverage based on health status.

“This survey underscores what I have been saying from the outset: If we pass comprehensive health reform that extends coverage but does nothing to reform our broken system by emphasizing prevention and public health, then we will have failed. And we do not intend to fail,” said Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA). “We know that prevention and wellness efforts are a key to reducing costs within a reformed health care system. And they will be a centerpiece of the reform effort underway on Capitol Hill.”

“This report shows that the American people believe prevention and wellness are the cornerstones of a high performing health care system. And they’re right,” said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont). “Today, we spend nearly \$800 billion on health problems that are directly linked to lifestyle and poor health habits each year—about one third of our total health care spending. Simply put, that’s too much. Reforming our system to focus on prevention will drive down costs and produce better health outcomes. That’s why it is so important that we pass comprehensive health care reform this year.”

“This poll gives hard evidence that Americans know what works and are ready for government to invest in their health,” said Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR). “They’re looking to government to reform the system so that everyone is covered, and prevention and wellness come first. I agree with the majority of Americans that these are cost-effective solutions that will improve quality of life, prevent disease, and most important save lives.”

“For too long, health care has focused on treating people after they become sick instead of trying to help them stay healthy in the first place,” said Jeff Levi, PhD, Executive Director of TFAH. “This poll shows the American public strongly believes it’s time we shift from a sick care system to a true health care system that stresses disease prevention.”

“Our country will never contain health care costs until we place a higher priority on public health and prevention programs, said Congresswoman Kay Granger (R-TX) Co-Chair of Prevention Caucus. “An investment of just \$10 per person per year in proven community-based programs could save this country more than \$16 billion annually within five years. And, this new poll shows that a majority of Americans not only recognize the importance of prevention, but support spending a greater percentage of our health care dollars on prevention rather than on treating people after they become sick.”

“Any health reform effort must make a serious commitment to prevention and wellness. Not only does the science say we need to target disease before it strikes, but the American people are saying it too – loud and clear,” said Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA), Chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Health Care Task Force. “Prevention is America’s top health reform priority because it will not only lower disease rates across the population, eliminate health disparities and better ensure equality, it also saves us precious health care dollars as we prevent disease and not just treat it.”

More than three-quarters of Americans (76 percent) support increasing funding for prevention programs that provide people with information and resources and creating policies that help people make healthier choices. Investing in prevention is popular across the political spectrum, with 86 percent of Democrats, 71 percent of Republicans, and 70 percent of Independents supporting investing more in prevention.

“This poll shows that Americans from coast to coast and across the political spectrum are overwhelmingly in favor of investing in disease prevention,” said Al Quinlan, President of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. “More than three-quarters of Americans believe the country should invest more in keeping people healthier, and by a nearly four-to-one ratio, they support putting more emphasis on preventing disease rather than treating people after they become sick.”

“We know that strategic investments in disease prevention programs in communities can result in a big payoff in a short time -- reducing health care costs, increasing the productivity of the nation’s workforce, and helping people lead healthier lives,” said Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, M.D., M.B.A. president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

While Americans believe that prevention will save money (77 percent agree with the statement that “prevention will save us money”), they strongly support prevention regardless of its impact on costs. Rather, they point clearly to keeping people healthy as the best reason to invest in prevention, with 72 percent agreeing with the statement that “investing in prevention is worth it even if it doesn’t save us money, because it will prevent disease and save lives.” Additionally, 57 percent agree more with the statement “we should invest in prevention to keep people healthier and improve quality of life” than the statement “we should invest in prevention to lower health care costs” (21 percent).

“We gave Americans a list of proposals being considered to reform health care, and investing in prevention trumped them all,” said Bill McInturff, Partner and Co-Founder of Public Opinion

Strategies. “It’s clear that Americans see the value of prevention for reducing disease, improving quality of life, and lowering health care costs.”

“Spiraling health care costs and poor outcomes will only get worse in the absence of employer action and intervention,” said Robert J. Gould, Ph.D., president for Partnership for Prevention. “Through Partnership for Prevention’s *Leading by Example* initiative, we’re seeing a growing number of corporations support healthy behaviors through worksite-based programs. One of our members – Dow Chemical Co. – reports that its workplace wellness program saved the company more than 9,000 absentee days last year and contributed value equal to seven cents per share of company stock. Smart businesses pay for prevention, because prevention pays.”

Americans believe the nation needs to put more emphasis on prevention (59 percent) rather than thinking there needs to be more emphasis on treatment (15 percent), by nearly a four to one ratio. This represents a significant shift toward prevention over the last two decades -- in 1987, only 45 thought there should be greater emphasis on prevention.

The poll, which reflects the responses from 1,014 registered voters, was conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies from May 7 to 12, 2009, and is available at www.healthyamericans.org. The margin of error was +/- 3.1 percent.

Trust for America’s Health is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority. www.healthyamericans.org.

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