

National Health Care Reform by Sam Trivette Medical Information Director

Many members have ask me in recent weeks if all the national debate on health care reform is of any concern to retired Alaska Public Employees, and if so, why. Yes, health care reform is a **major concern** to all of us and here is a brief explanation of why.

For those of you that have watched any television news or read newspapers, or viewed the news on the internet, know health care reform is a major part of the “news day”. Unfortunately, because of the potential impact on many businesses, huge amounts of money are being spent on trying to influence us against reform. Not unexpected, of course. And the landscape of the debate is changing daily.

There is general agreement by most that the costs of medical care are rising so rapidly major reform is critical to contain and even lower the costs of health care. Our President has said he will not sign a bill that does not reduce the costs of health care. There are at least five committees in Congress working diligently on plans to meet these goals as of this writing. Some of us have been attending forums in Alaska, some set up by politicians, some by community groups, physicians, public health officials, etc. I’ve attended two such forums myself recently, speaking at the Senator Begich meeting. These issues were a big part of our AFT Retiree meeting in late May as well as RPEA meetings since then.

Here are some key talking points RPEA and AFT think are worth highlighting.

- Some in Congress want to **tax employer-provided health care benefits**; AFT and RPEA are adamantly opposed to this. In negotiating benefits, workers sacrificed needed pay increases to keep affordable health coverage. Taxing those benefits would penalize middle and low-income people and put an even heavier burden on older workers and retirees.
- Some in Congress are opposed to establishing an effective and comprehensive **public plan option** that would guarantee quality, affordable coverage. We believe a public health insurance plan would hold down costs, force private companies to complete, and guarantee that high quality, affordable coverage would be there. Such a plan would use existing health care providers.
- Health Care Reform must focus on **controlling drug costs**. There are various methods that have been proposed, but all experts agree drug costs must be reduced if a plan is to be effective.
- Health Care Reform must **provide sufficient qualified medical personnel** to provide quality medical services. Recent research documents many thousands of lives are lost annually because of preventable errors, much of them attributable to insufficient staffing, forced overtime of staff, etc.
- We will not support any legislation that will not allow retirees and employees to **keep a current medical benefits plan** and continue with their current health care providers.

We expect some of the various versions of legislation will begin to emerge soon as the likely primary “vehicles” for reform and we can then begin to focus more on specifics. Soon, we will be asking that you contact **your** Members of Congress to express your views on the provisions being presented. About a third of RPEA members live outside Alaska, and

everyone has two Senators and a Representative in Congress. It is possible that AFT's and RPEA's positions could change as legislation begins to move, and we will do our best to let you know in a timely manner. We know that our US Senators and Representatives do frequently pay attention to their voters, so we are going to urge your involvement in this process. Please do check our web site regularly at <http://rpea.apea-aft.org> for updates in the next few months. Remember, even if you don't have the internet at home, use a relative's computer, a neighbor's, or go to your local library.