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Hagel, Kerrey discuss health care issues

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With the nation's economic troubles making affordable health care an increasingly important issue for many Americans, Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel and former Sen. Bob Kerrey discussed America's health care problems at a forum Thursday morning at Kimball Recital Hall.

The forum - sponsored by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center, Prairie Fire and the AARP - was set up in a town hall format with Hagel and Kerrey taking questions from audience members.

One area Hagel and Kerrey agreed on was the need for politicians to seek outside help in dealing with health care problems. Hagel proposed the creation of a board of medical experts to advise Congress on health care issues, which Hagel said many members of Congress aren't qualified to deal with.

An independent advisory board would also help politicians get around political problems that limit their effectiveness, Hagel said. The current political climate sometimes hinders politicians, he said, because they can't propose the large scale policy changes needed to fix health care problems without angering some of their constituents.

"They can't throw something out there that's too radical or too scary, but this needs a radical, scary solution," Hagel said.

While some have said the United States should switch to a socialized health care system similar to those in Canada or Sweden, Hagel and Kerrey said simply transferring those systems to the U.S. wouldn't work. America's large and diverse population means it faces different challenges than countries with socialized health care, Kerrey said, and the U.S. needs solutions tailored to those problems.

"We need something uniquely American," Kerrey said.

Kerrey also advocated changing federal law so anyone able to prove they're a legal resident of the U.S. would be eligible for health care subsidies.

Currently, government subsidies are only available to people who meet specific criteria, such as having certain medical conditions or having worked for the government in the past.

Expanding access to these subsidies would allow the government to help larger numbers of people, Kerrey said, and help deal with the problem of more and more people losing health insurance.

Unrealistic expectations about the quality of health care in America are another challenge facing the country, Kerrey said. People often expect more from their health care providers than they're able to provide, which can lead to conflict between doctors and patients.

"Medicine is not a perfect science, and yet we expect perfection," Kerrey said. "We need to lower our expectations of what health care providers and do for us."

While Hagel and Kerrey were optimistic that America's health care problems would eventually be resolved, both said finding solutions would require innovative solutions and time.

"There's not one simple answer," Hagel said.

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