

Round 1: Town Hall Meetings, Round 2: Obama's Healthcare Speech...

By Joe Torella



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If you're wondering what happens in round 3, don't. Thus far we've seen Democrats battling Republicans, strong disagreement within both parties and finally an emotional and direct reaction to the process by the citizenry. Many anticipate the road to a healthcare solution under President Obama will be fought round-by-round. But the takeaway message in the President's speech was very clear – the time for games has passed and when the bell sounds, the American people will have some sort of national health care plan – period.

President Obama, while enjoying his vacation, monitored the Town Hall meetings which reinforced that Americans take their healthcare/insurance very seriously and very personally. A brilliant politician, Obama knows that Washington cannot drag 'Joe the Plumber' into the argument without offering him a solution – one that Americans can understand. Knowing that buzz words – 'Exchange' 'Co-op' and 'Public Option' – need to be personalized, he built them into a simple context: "Build on what works and fix what's broken".

He sent two distinct messages to two very different audiences. For the American people – who simply ask, "What does it mean to me?" – he was saying 'pay no attention to the man behind the curtain'. He asked that rhetoric and accusations not color action; that we're already 80% of the way there and partisan disagreements are creating unnecessary confusion.

He advocated three clear goals and urged collective support and adoption: 1. Stability for those who

have coverage; 2. A plan for those that do not; and, 3. A slowing of cost increases that have fueled many of the problems we now face.

His second targeted audience, legislators, heard the President dismiss the idea that only a single plan could meet his approval. He outlined the elements he'd like included, but affirmed he would not risk what Americans need because he is unable to get them everything he wants them to have. He blamed partisanship for almost killing Medicare and before that, Social Security. . . crystallizing the importance of working within and across party lines to develop a healthcare proposal that achieves his stated goals.

Mr. Obama expects Government to work together to provide stable, predictable coverage for every American with an infrastructure to pay for it; not by compromising what already exists, but by improving conditions for those who have insurance and making it affordable for those who either don't have coverage or where their current coverage is inadequate. Included are strong protections against: denial of care/coverage for pre-existing conditions, dropping coverage or watering it down, and arbitrary or capricious annual/lifetime caps.

For those without such access, Mr. Obama called for plans to be made available through Insurance Exchanges/Co-ops; claiming that private insurers will welcome added incentive for millions of Americans, currently uninsured, to participate as vibrant new customers. For those who can't afford the plan, mandating

coverage and providing tax credits and/or subsidies will help millions of individuals and small business owners who either don't want to provide coverage today or can't afford it.

Those already participating in employer-based plans, (Medicare, Medicaid or VA benefits) will continue to access those programs. Further, Mr. Obama expects to save lives and money by extending coverage for routine and preventive care. Mandating participation and 'encouraging' employer plans to provide for hardship waivers round out the basic tenets of his plan.

But, President Obama goes further by encouraging Government-sponsored plans that compete with the private market – 'Public Option' – not to 'injure' it, but to ensure a robust, competitive market. **And there, perhaps, the main rub.** The plan seems fine as outlined until you attempt to define *affordable*, project an accurate budget, source the funding, determine true impact or if it competes on an unlevel playing field with the private sector. Unfortunately, we won't know until final legislative package is revealed.

In future articles we'll focus on these considerations and offer round-by-round analysis when appropriate. However, it's clear that the President is moving us to the bell so quickly that we may not have time to review the legislative proposals, understand how they affect us or meaningfully influence the process. Hmmm, was that the goal? Ding-ding, round 3. **FA**

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