



health08.org
Election news, analysis and events

Transcript provided by Health08.org, a free service of the Kaiser Family Foundation¹
(Tip: Click on the binocular icon to search this document)

**Viewpoints: The Health Care Debate
AFL-CIO President John Sweeney
Kaiser Family Foundation
June 11, 2008**

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

[START RECORDING]

FEMALE SPEAKER: President Sweeney of the AFL-CIO, thank you for joining us today on health08.org.

JOHN SWEENEY: Thank you.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Virtually every member of the union has health care coverage. So, when it comes to the health care system, what is the biggest problem they face? Affordability?

JOHN SWEENEY: Affordability is definitely a problem, but they have seen in their own experiences in their collective bargaining, the crisis that we have with health care and they are very realistic about the number of people who do not have health care and they see it in their own communities and in some cases, in their own workplaces. But, it is not just cost, although cost is big in a period when wages have been stagnant, the cost is more serious than it has ever been. But, access and quality are significant concerns of working people and their families.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And I know that the union supports universal coverage. How do you get there?

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, I think we have to have sweeping change and we have to recognize that we cannot do this incrementally. We have to find a way to build the situation in terms of the public accepting what kind of plan they have. There certainly have to be options for the public in terms of some have very good coverage today and others have inadequate

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

coverage. I think that the coverage really has to respect the positions that different people are in different situations. So there has to be some flexibility, but it has to be universal and it has to be focused on the high cost as well as the quality of health care.

FEMALE SPEAKER: And, is it the Conyers Bill that the AFL-CIO still supports, which I think informally is known as Medicare for all, a single payer plan?

JOHN SWEENEY: Congressman Conyers has introduced a very significant bill. There are some other members who have proposed bills which are pretty good as well. But, we are holding our options open in terms of the timing and waiting for the congress to really get into this debate and then we will be deciding and participating in the discussions and hopefully, we will be supporting a very significant national health care bill.

FEMALE SPEAKER: But, philosophically, is it the blend of private and public? Or does it fall more on the public side?

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, it depends on how all of this develops. There is no question about it that the public approach is a very interesting one and would probably provide the kind of coverage that is necessary. But, we have to also recognize the fact that we have to have the political will to

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

accomplish this and if there has to be some combination, we are willing to really address that and to take a close look at it.

FEMALE SPEAKER: You said a moment ago that we cannot do anything incrementally and in this series of interviews I have been doing, people seem to fall in one of two categories; Big and bold and soon after a new President takes office or smaller steps. Why do you think the first way is the better way to go?

JOHN SWEENEY: Because I think that we have been talking about this long enough and we certainly have had enough experience in terms of what the health crisis is in our country and I think we have to really address these issues with the intention that they deserve. A few years back when the Clintons were proposing a health care reform, we had 35 million people who were not covered and today it is 47 and continuing to rise. The problem is not going to get any better until we do have significant change and I think that the bigger and bolder concept is what we should be looking at.

FEMALE SPEAKER: But, does the Clinton experience, back in the early '90s, speak against having some success at the big and bold as opposed to the incremental?

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, I believe that we have learned a little bit since the Clinton approach was introduced and I think that we understand that you really cannot resolve this crisis on an incremental basis that you have to really address

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

the major factors which are cost, quality, and access. And I think we have to find that solution.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Does it discourage you then, that there are some political leaders on Capital Hill, mostly Democrats, who are beginning to try to tamp down expectations about the ability of the country to do big and bold in the next couple of years because of the cost?

JOHN SWEENEY: There is no question about it that the cost is a major factor but I think that we can probably provide the kind of health care that is necessary at lower cost or certainly not more cost than we are spending on health care today. I think that we have a lot to learn in terms of the quality and cost and relate the two together as well as the access and that we can do it within the restrictions that we might have today.

I think that there are employers who are providing very good health care at a very high cost and it has affected their ability to compete with other employers and I think that those costs could certainly be leveled off or possibly be introduced. There are many cost saving factors that can be a part of this discussion.

FEMALE SPEAKER: What would be tops on your list?

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, prescription drugs probably looms out there as certainly one that has to be addressed. But, I think that we have to look at technology and we have to look at

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

administration of health care systems and we have to find ways to raise the level of quality, at the same time try not to increase the cost.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Is there another country that you look at and go, that is a reasonable model for the United States?

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, there are a number of models that we have seen but we have to tailor the model that is best for our own country and we can learn from different countries what they are providing and how they address the issue of access. I believe that to the north of us, Canada has a system that has been very effective. Some might be critical of it, but I think overall, that it is a pretty good system. Many of the European countries—

The thing that people must focus on is that every other industrialized country in the world has found some way to provide national health care for their folks and it is about time we had the political will to do it.

FEMALE SPEAKER: President Sweeney, if next year there is a meaningful, debate, discussion, action about changes in the health care system and the AFL obviously is at the table for the negotiations, what is your line in the sand? You suggested earlier you would be open to public private versus public only, but what are the lines in the sand that you would not cross?

¹ Health08.org makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of written transcripts, but due to the nature of transcribing recorded material and the deadlines involved, they may contain errors or incomplete content. We apologize for any inaccuracies.

JOHN SWEENEY: Well, I think that we have to have an open mind in terms of what the final plan might be and that we have to listen to what others have to say. We certainly have to listen to those who are experts in the field of health care, but the funding— and, as we said earlier, we have to learn from the experiences of other countries.

All I can say is that this is probably the number one issue on the minds of working families today when it comes to the election and the debate that we have seen among the Presidential candidates is an indication of how big this issue is and how focused they are on it. And I believe that voters are going to hold the candidates accountable on these issues, not just for the office of President, but for electing members of Congress as well as electing local political leaders.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Okay. Thank you so much President John Sweeney, I appreciate it.

JOHN SWEENEY: Thank you, nice to be with you.

FEMALE SPEAKER: Thank you very much.

[END RECORDING]