

**Viewpoints: The Health Care Debate
National Women's Law Center Vice President and Director of
Health and Reproductive Rights Judith Waxman
Kaiser Family Foundation
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JACKIE JUDD: Judy Waxman, thank you for coming in today, joining us.

JUDITH WAXMAN: So pleased to be here.

JACKIE JUDD: It was about a year ago that the center came out with a report card on the status of women's health care.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: The grade was unsatisfactory.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Correct.

JACKIE JUDD: Given that, what does the center view as the single most pressing issue facing the nation in terms of health care?

JUDITH WAXMAN: The center I want to say is called the National Women's Law Center and we do primarily work on the concerns of women, but of course women care about their families, too, so we do care about health care for all Americans. Our report talked about how women have a unique relationship with the health care system. They are the ones who navigate the system for their families. They have employer-sponsored coverage as men do, but they don't often get it through their own employer. They have more trouble getting it on their own and women actually use more health care themselves. They have greater health care needs. They have greater expenses than men. So we as an organization looking at

the health care system really do believe we need to do major reform, that we should be looking at coverage for all and coverage that is affordable particularly because women need more and have more economic issues and also, of course, that is comprehensive.

JACKIE JUDD: Well, let's start at the top, coverage for all. In the center's view, how do you get there? What's the best way?

JUDITH WAXMAN: We don't have a best way really and a number of us have been through this exercise before including yourselves and I think we want to get there. We think this is a second shot for many of us, although of course the country is going through this many more times than just two and so-

JACKIE JUDD: You're referring to the Clinton Reform Plan of early '90s?

JUDITH WAXMAN: I am. I'm referring to-

JACKIE JUDD: Okay.

JUDITH WAXMAN: -Right, the last time Congress and the administration tackled this in a major way, the problem of health care coverage for all, so that there are a number of ways we could get there. But interestingly we did a poll recently, this summer, on what women want and over 80 percent say a new administration and Congress must tackle this issue as a priority.

JACKIE JUDD: But there is often a gap between what the electorate says it wants, what it's willing to support, and then what a new president is willing to do. You've been in Washington for a very long time.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: You know how challenging it could be.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: As you said you lived through the early '90s during the Clinton effort, what's the realistic opportunity for some kind of change in a new administration whether it be McCain or Obama?

JUDITH WAXMAN: I'm very hopeful. What can I say? I'm very hopeful. I think the American public as evidenced by our poll really does want this as a top priority and as you say it is a complicated situation. There are many challenges to face, but it really is a growing crisis particularly for women who you may not know actually go much more often without prescription drugs, for example, because they can't afford it, have higher medical debt because they can't afford it. There is a real affordability gap that we are hearing more and more about. Comprehensive coverage, the reason we say that is because if the coverage is inadequate, if it doesn't cover a woman through her childhood and adolescence to help her be strong and healthy through her reproductive years and covering a whole range of reproductive health as well as other health

care and helps her age well, the society is really at risk. And so we do really think now is the time to take a look at those issues.

JACKIE JUDD: And you said a moment or two ago that there are a number of different ways to get to the goals that the center supports.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Absolutely.

JACKIE JUDD: What, in the center's view, should be on the table? Let's put it that way. What kind of ideas should be on the table?

JUDITH WAXMAN: We are part of a large coalition. You may have heard about the Health Care for American Now Coalition and so together with all sorts of other consumer and provider organizations, we have a number of principles and among them are coverage for all and the other issues I have already mentioned. We feel that it has to start big and that it has to be something that can actually get everyone coverage. Now we also are not naïve and think that if everybody has health coverage that means we're going to have health care. There are so many other issues, infrastructure, quality, so forth, that we need of course to tackle also. But we really think that we don't want to prescribe from the get-go. It must actually be this way, except I think to the degree that we do think a lot of people like what they already have and that it should build on our current system. We do not think we want to throw baby

out with the bath water so to speak, building on our current system now of employer coverage, filling those gaps as I mentioned for women, they do not necessarily get coverage through their own plan. A lot of them work part-time. And the public programs which serve a lot of women, actually more women than men, can be strengthened to bring in more men, more children and fill in all the gaps.

JACKIE JUDD: But by saying build on the system we currently have, do you include in that the efforts of the private sector, that is, employers still providing insurance to their workers?

JUDITH WAXMAN: Yes, I think that that is what I'm talking about. I'm saying the system is so complex and in many ways entrenched. And happily, the majority of us do have some coverage. Obviously, there are way too many people without coverage as well, but we think that building on the system we have now, yes, including employers in the mix, exactly as they are now, maybe yes, maybe no. But including employers in the mix, government in the mix, individuals in the mix, filling in all the holes of what we have, letting people keep what they currently have, but making it a strong system really is the way to go.

JACKIE JUDD: You used the word before big, that we should do it big. There have been other people who've sat in that chair for these interviews-

JUDITH WAXMAN: I'm sure.

JACKIE JUDD: -who say not big and bold, small, incremental steps because that's more politically realistic. So why do you fall on the big side and not the small, incremental side?

JUDITH WAXMAN: I think the problems are too big to start small and incremental. Obviously, we have loved some of the steps that have helped some people along the way, but this is a uniquely American problem and it is something that Americans can solve with political will, which I believe is building. We can tackle it. We don't have to do a tiny piece and then wait another 15 years for another tiny piece. All Americans really need access to comprehensive, affordable health care and it's time we really tackled the problem head-on.

JACKIE JUDD: At the moment as we're speaking which is in September, the economy is very volatile. Some people would say we're in a recession. How do you think that limits the options of the new administration policy makers in terms of approaching something big with health care reform?

JUDITH WAXMAN: Health care reform has many challenges. Obviously economics is one of them, but health care is an economic issue. Women can't afford to get their prescription drugs. They can't afford to go to the doctor. They go without care because of economics. They are in medical debt because

they did go when they did not have appropriate coverage.

They're totally intertwined and obviously we have many economic problems to solve, but solving health care would be an economic boon as well.

JACKIE JUDD: I've a final question and one I can't really ignore having you here with me from the National Women's Law Center and that is reproductive rights-

JUDITH WAXMAN: Oh, yes,

JACKIE JUDD: -an issue unique to women.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Yes.

JACKIE JUDD: Legal issues, economic issues, coverage issues, how do all those play out in the next couple of years with the new administration and a new Congress? What do you want to see?

JUDITH WAXMAN: As far as health care reform goes, we really would like to see comprehensive health care throughout a woman's life span and I have mentioned that, but I think that is how we see reproductive health services as something that a woman needs to have, different kinds at different stages of her life and that the comprehensive health plan should help her be able to do that because it is important for her health and for her family's health and that's what we would like to see.

JACKIE JUDD: Okay, thank you very much, Judy Waxman, the National Women's Law Center. Appreciate it.

JUDITH WAXMAN: Okay, thank you, enjoyed it.

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