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House Republicans Announce Legislation to Increase Access to Affordable Health Insurance

-- Consumer-Driven Plans Allow Small Business to Cover Employees, Reduce Uninsured Population --
-- Increasing Access to Quality, Affordable Health Care at Forefront of House GOP Agenda --

RICHMOND, VA – Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates William J. Howell (R-Stafford), House Majority Caucus Chairman Samuel A. “Sam” Nixon, Jr. (R-Chesterfield), and Delegates Phillip A. Hamilton (R-Newport News) and Daniel W. “Danny” Marshall, III (R-Danville) today announced a package of legislative initiatives to improve health care accessibility and affordability for Virginians. Advancing the House Republican agenda of practical solutions to help restore economic prosperity, the proposed bills will make it easier for small businesses to provide health insurance to their employees, expand access and increase competition for health care services, and accelerate bringing Virginia’s health care system into the 21st century.

“Because too many Virginians are struggling to cover the rising costs of health care for their families, House Republicans have crafted common-sense solutions to meet this serious challenge,” declared Speaker Howell. “Our health care package seeks to address the worries people have about their access to and the quality and price of health care services. That’s why the innovative approaches we’re championing will give Virginia’s many small businesses the ability to offer affordable health care coverage for their employees. Small businesses and start-ups throughout our Commonwealth have long provided the foundation of prosperity and will, undoubtedly, be the lifeblood of our future economic recovery. The health care bills are further evidence that House Republicans are providing practical solutions to the challenges that Virginians face everyday.”

Health insurance costs have risen 129% since 1999, and 84% since 2001, according to the National Federation of Independent Business (NFIB). These huge cost increases have forced small business owners to terminate their health plans while preventing others from instituting any in the first place. These dramatic increases, in part, can be attributed to mandated benefits requirements, which increase the cost of health insurance by as much as 45% in some markets. Delegate Danny Marshall’s legislation, [House Bill 2024](#), would give businesses with 50 or fewer employees the ability to offer their workers health insurance coverage that does not include some or all of the costly mandates currently required, allowing consumers to tailor a plan that best fits their needs and pocketbooks.

Small businesses that have not offered employee health insurance in the past six months would be eligible for these consumer-driven plans, adding previously uninsured people to the ranks of the insured by making coverage more affordable. Only 45% of small businesses offered health insurance nationally in 2007, down significantly from 56% in 1999. Delegate Danny Marshall’s bill was a recommendation of the Virginia Small Business Commission.

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“Small businesses desperately want to be able to offer health insurance to their workers, but cannot afford the increasing costs in the current economic climate,” noted Delegate Danny Marshall, a member of the House Commerce and Labor Committee. “My legislation will make it easier for employees to receive access to needed health care. With over 1 million uninsured Virginians, this practical solution would help bring coverage to many families at an affordable cost to their small business employers.”

Delegate Hamilton’s [House Bill 1598](#) changes the criteria to be considered by the Commissioner of Health when reviewing Certificate of Public Need (COPN) applications by owners and sponsors of identified medical care facility projects. While there are currently 21 criteria to be considered, that number would be reduced to 8 under the Hamilton-sponsored legislation. In many cases, criteria were consolidated for clarification purposes or eliminated because they were not being seriously considered. The primary areas of focus for the streamlined criteria is patient access to services, affordability and financial feasibility of a health care project, community support for a project, institutional competition within a health planning region, and health care services to the indigent population in a region. House Bill 1598 already has been approved by the House of Delegates on a strong bipartisan vote of 88 to 0 to 1, and now awaits action by the Senate of Virginia.

“The COPN bill represents significant legislative reform to what has been a controversial health care topic over the past 20 years,” commented Delegate Hamilton, Chairman of the House Health, Welfare & Institutions Committee. “Through the cooperative and collaborative work of the Administration, the Committee and the healthcare provider network, consensus on a framework for addressing the COPN issue has at long last been developed.”

Building on the previous efforts of House Republicans to integrate 21st Century technology into the field of health care services, Delegate Nixon’s [House Bill 2044](#) tasks the Information Technology Investment Board to develop standards for data and technical aspects of health information technology systems or software. These standards will assist in ensuring systems will be operated efficiently and effectively for the benefit of families and all health care consumers.

“Bringing best practices to health information technology systems improves the delivery of care, reduces costs and cuts down on unnecessary errors that can cost lives,” said Delegate Nixon, Vice-Chairman of the House Health, Welfare and Institutions Committee and a member of the House Science & Technology Committee. “Reaching out and working across party lines and with the Administration, especially the Secretary of Technology, House Republicans are committed to developing practical solutions to bring quality health care to Virginians.”

“Offering innovative and practical solutions to Virginia’s challenges is a hallmark of House Republican leadership in the General Assembly,” concluded Speaker Howell. “Now, with the Commonwealth confronting the most difficult economic environment in at least two decades, it is essential to build and expand upon our previous accomplishments, providing real results that will further improve the quality of life for all Virginians.”

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