

HEALTHY PLATFORM

Wellness: Change All Americans Can Agree On
By Jonathan H. Lack

Congratulations to both the Obama-Biden and McCain-Palin campaigns for positioning themselves as agents of change in their respective bids for the White House. Each of these campaigns is presenting Americans quite a different view of the “change” they will be offering should they win this month’s election.

In such a close election, there will inevitably be divisiveness between the two campaigns, which will trickle down to colleagues, friends, family and neighbors. However, there is one change that each of us, regardless of our preferred candidates, can agree upon and that is to demand that our country’s approach to healthcare be reoriented.

Today, our healthcare delivery systems and related infrastructure primarily focus on sick care. The time has come to recognize the importance of wellness and begin building a robust preventive care model to enhance the health and well being of our citizens. Otherwise, change will occur, but for the worse.

We must embrace the need to transform our healthcare system to one based on prevention. Otherwise, we will all become more vulnerable to our internal adversaries cancer, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease and others that know no political party, gender, race, religion or economic status distinctions.

It is estimated that less than 10 percent of the \$2.16 trillion we spend on healthcare annually goes toward prevention. Our country simply cannot afford to have so many people getting sick with preventable ailments. Not only does this contribute to the increase in the cost of healthcare, but also to lost productivity and lost wages, a lose-lose for employees, management and investors.

Both Obama and McCain realize that our country has a healthcare crisis, but their respective solutions up to this point have provided little focus on prevention. Obama wants to spread the cost of healthcare to a universal healthcare program; thereby making it more affordable to the under and uninsured. Yet this alone will not solve the growing healthcare disparities among ethnic and racial minorities.

McCain wants to reduce the cost of healthcare and to give back tax rebates, thereby also making health insurance more affordable to the under and uninsured. Yet, his plan will not reduce absenteeism and presenteeism among the 70 percent of American workers who already have health insurance.

The reality is that health insurance alone does not make



anyone “healthier.” Rather, it merely allows you access to care once you are sick. Yes, regular check-ups and annual physicals are very important preventive measures, but only when they are utilized. Experience shows us that many who have insurance do not take advantage of these services.

Whereas the plans offered by McCain and Obama might lessen the financial burden to individuals and families, they simply do not reduce the inherent problem facing our country: too many people are getting sick because they are not taking personal responsibility for their own well-being, costing our society money we do not have.

With baby boomers getting older and, thus, more susceptible to illness and our children facing an obesity crisis leading to a diabetes epidemic, we need to change the way we approach healthcare to a preventive-based model or we are going to be facing a disaster that none of us, regardless of our politics, can fathom. No partisan plan can solve this problem alone, only an American plan deemed as a national priority under the leadership of the next president.

Our next president is going to have to initiate a plan that encourages and teaches Americans young and old how to take care of themselves by encouraging everyone to make better behavioral choices. Such a plan will have to give incentives for employers to create wellness programs and offer tax breaks for consumers to buy wellness-oriented products and services.

Our next president must show real leadership by instituting a debate on the best ways to incentivize healthy behavior and to discourage unhealthy and costly behaviors. Prevention before intervention cannot be a mere slogan. It must be the basis of our country’s healthcare policy no matter who wins the White House, otherwise we and our kids and grandkids all lose.

The good news about prevention is that it is more cost effective than sick care. Additionally, having a health system based on the edict of personal responsibility and choice not only makes sense and saves dollars, it also saves lives.

Jonathan H. Lack is the founding executive director of the Houston Wellness Association (a 501(C) 6), whose mission is to advance the health and well-being of our community and the economic vitality of our wellness sector by transforming Houston into a widely-modeled, innovative city for healthy living. Houstonwellness.org.

