

Opening Statement of Republican Leader Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Health
“Health Care Lifeline: The Affordable Care Act and the COVID-19
Pandemic”
September 23, 2020

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Madame Chairwoman. And welcome to our witnesses, thank you for being here today to offer your expertise.

Today’s hearing could offer us a great opportunity to hear from experts about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected health care coverage in this country. We could also discuss how, despite the Affordable Care Act still being the law of the land, the underlying costs of health care have continued to rise and are now being borne by patients who may have lost their employer-based care. Furthermore, we could also explore ways for the economy to safely reopen in coordination with public health efforts to ensure furloughed workers can come back to their jobs and regain the benefits they have bargained for and earned. I hope this hearing is an opportunity to discuss those worthy issues, which I believe should be of bipartisan interest.

I can't help but feel, however, that today's hearing is somewhat political in nature. That this topic will be used as an excuse to admonish the Trump Administration and celebrate the Affordable Care Act, to relitigate partisan debates of the past.

I want to be perfectly clear: Republicans support affordable health care for Americans. We also fully support protections for patients with pre-existing conditions. In fact, measures we've put on the House floor to affirm these protections have been denied four different times by Democrats. This issue is not up for debate. Holding a hearing that drudges up old arguments about the Affordable Care Act in an attempt to label Republicans as anti-patient is not only disingenuous, it is a waste of precious time.

In addition to supporting pre-existing conditions protections, we also want to address the cost of health care, an underlying problem that I hear from my constituents about on a regular basis. Americans were promised their premiums would go down by \$2500 a year if we passed the ACA but they did the opposite. Addressing the cost of care is why I have worked in a bipartisan fashion with Chairman Pallone and Senators Alexander and Murray on the Lower Health Care Costs Act, a bill that would bring much-needed transparency into our health care system and end the nefarious practice of surprise billing. These are the kinds of

policies we should be discussing today, policies that put patients back in control of their health care and put dollars back in their pockets.

States, as the laboratories for democracy and public policy, are innovating to keep health care coverage accessible and affordable. My home state of Oregon, by working with both the Obama and Trump Administrations, has successfully applied for multiple waivers from CMS to invest in care and drive down the cost curve.

I'm also thrilled to have Director Cameron here from my neighboring state of Idaho. Director Cameron: I look forward to hearing about your partnership with providers to keep costs down for patients, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As for the federal response to COVID-19, we have worked in a bipartisan fashion to provide trillions of dollars in relief to our communities. We have made testing and associated visits free to all patients regardless of their insurance status. We have poured funds into state Medicaid programs and set aside \$175 billion for medical providers to bring accessible testing and treatment to patients across the country. We have greatly expanded coverage of telehealth services and given

patients more flexibility in how they spend their hard-earned dollars on health care expenses during the pandemic.

We do not believe, however, that the answer to every challenge is billions of dollars in increased federal spending. We have seen how one-size-fits-all approaches have affected the underlying cost of care, and we should be wary of the politicization of this crisis as a reason to massively expand federal programs. There are many types of coverage, including government programs, designed for times like this.

Dr. Holtz-Eakin: I look forward to your testimony on how we can target our response to directly address the challenges created by the economic downturn associated with this pandemic.

I want to close by urging my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to resist the temptation to engage in partisan politics; to be forward looking in our response to the COVID-19 pandemic; and to constructively engage our witnesses to tackle the legitimate public policy issues that have arisen during this crisis. If we simply retreat into our corners and use this hearing as an excuse to throw rocks at the other side, the American people will not benefit. I yield back.