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## **Healthy competition best way to fix problem of uninsured**

*By JAY WEBBER*

New Jersey Democrats recently unveiled the latest in a long line of big-ticket spending items: a universal health insurance mandate for New Jersey.

The plan would require every New Jerseyan to buy a health insurance policy, and if a person cannot afford a policy, the state would subsidize its cost. The initial annual price for this expansion of government is \$1.7 billion. Gov. Corzine has acknowledged taxpayers simply cannot afford the proposal.

And when was the last time we saw a government program come in under budget in New Jersey? Audits already have found wasteful spending, poor oversight and downright fraud in the state's existing healthcare program.

Our state needs health-care reform, to be sure, but there is a better alternative to a taxpayer-funded, bureaucracy-based proposal. I have proposed the New Jersey Healthcare Choice Act, which would lower the cost of health insurance, slash the number of the 1.2 million New Jerseyans now uninsured and require no government subsidy. It is not another massive government program.

One commentator remarking on past attempts at health-care reform called New Jersey "the poster child for how to destroy a health insurance market." How did the state fail so spectacularly?

New Jersey law permits individuals to buy only high-end policies subject to our state's cumbersome and expensive regulations, which may be the most burdensome in the nation. Micromanaging lawmakers have locked us into a Hobson's choice of purchasing gold-plated, one-size-fits-all health coverage or living with no coverage at all.

The government's hyper-regulation of the health insurance market means we pay as much as three times more for coverage than our neighbors in Pennsylvania. For example, a single woman, 29, living in Montville might pay \$2,040 annually for a bare-bones health policy. Across the Delaware River in Lansdale, Pa., the same individual would pay \$810 for basic health coverage. A family of four living in Parsippany that pays \$7,835 a year for low-end coverage would pay \$3,172 in Blue Bell, Pa.

The New Jersey Healthcare Choice Act would permit New Jerseyans to access lower prices available in other states by buying health insurance from insurers approved to sell insurance in other states. Individuals, families and small employers would have the right to look for health insurance policies anywhere in the nation to best suit their needs and budgets. Nothing would

force New Jerseyans into buying insurance outside New Jersey. Any consumer still would be free to buy New Jersey policies.

But many will not continue to shop only in the Garden State. Policies in our neighboring states are not inferior to those sold here. They just are less encumbered by government regulation. Those policies span a much greater range of affordability. Think of it this way: New Jersey requires everyone who has health coverage to own a Cadillac policy, while other states permit residents to choose from Honda, Chevrolet or Cadillac policies.

That increased accessibility encourages more uninsured people to buy health insurance without costing taxpayers a dime. Health-care choice would help people who lost insurance because they are temporarily out of work. An estimated 45 percent of uninsured people lack insurance for six months or less, most because they are between jobs.

Opening our market to out-of-state insurers would lower the cost of health coverage for those families by as much as 60 percent and would allow them to maintain health coverage during a tough time, without government assistance. Costs also would plummet for small employers, who often would provide health coverage for their employees but cannot afford it.

Liberating state health insurance markets is a trend across the country. Legislators in Maine, Wisconsin, Georgia, Colorado and California are in various stages of crafting proposals to permit their citizens to go out of state to buy insurance. A bill pending in Congress would accomplish this nationwide.

We live in a state that likes to consider itself progressive and cutting edge. If we are as ahead of the curve as we believe ourselves to be, then let us be the first to open our health insurance market to genuine competition. By loosening state government's iron-fisted grip on our citizens' insurance choices, we can make progress on an important social goal and save taxpayers from a mammoth and counterproductive health insurance mandate we cannot afford.

**Assemblyman Jay Webber is a Republican from Morris County.**