

# The Record

## Two lawmakers offer differing views on N.J. health care

Thursday, June 25, 2009

BY HERB JACKSON  
WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT

Two New Jersey state legislators gave a House subcommittee completely opposite opinions Wednesday about whether government involvement has made the state's health care system better.

Sen. Joseph Vitale, D-Middlesex, said New Jersey has "been one of the most progressive states in offering expanded access to hundreds of thousands of children and working parents."

**Assemblyman Jay Webber, R-Morris, said excessive state regulations drove away insurance companies and forced those who were able to get insurance to pay more for it, even while the ranks of the uninsured grew.**

The Trenton lawmakers appeared on the second day of three hearings into a massive overhaul of federal health care being considered by the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Among the many elements of the committee's reform plan is a prohibition on rate increases because of pre-existing conditions, and a prohibition against denying coverage because of someone's risk factors. New Jersey in 1992 imposed similar mandates on insurers covering individuals and small groups, the only kinds of health insurance states can regulate.

"I'm proud of the fact that in New Jersey those kinds of discriminations are not allowed," said Rep. Frank Pallone, D-Long Branch, the chairman of the health subcommittee. "This is a cornerstone of what we're trying to do, which is to have protections at the federal level."

**But Webber, who recently became chairman of the Republican State Committee, said insurance for individuals in New Jersey costs twice as much as the national average as a result of state mandates and other factors, including the state's high cost of living.**

**"Please don't do to the nation what New Jersey has done to itself," Webber told the subcommittee. "These reforms have created what I would call a toxic mix for destroying the health insurance market in the state."**

Webber also touted a bill he is sponsoring that would allow New Jersey residents to buy cheaper health plans offered in other states.

These plans would not include the same mandated coverage as state-regulated plans, but Webber said outside the hearing his bill would require clear notification about that to customers.

**"It's no longer acceptable to trap New Jerseyans in a system that they want to leave," Webber said.**

Vitale, the chairman of the state Senate's health committee, said out-of-state companies would "cherry pick" the best risks, leaving those considered higher risk for coverage, including women of child-bearing age, left paying higher premiums.

He said requiring New Jersey buyers to remain in the same group pools the risk for all.

Vitale touted the state's effort to expand coverage of children through the program New Jersey calls FamilyCare and Congress refers to as SCHIP, or the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

He also said that recent reforms allowed people to buy coverage through a state system, and accelerated enrollment of children in FamilyCare.

"We're currently well on our way towards comprehensive and transformational reform," Vitale said. But he said states cannot solve the problem alone, and Congress needs to act.

"Though we're proud of the work we've done we need the federal government, he said.