



## **Ageing U.S. lacks plan for long-term care**

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The good news is that Americans are living longer than ever before, and that's especially true in Pennsylvania, a state with one of the oldest populations in the country.

The bad news is that our nation's financial and health-care systems are woefully unprepared for them.

Worse, neither presidential candidate seems to be giving it much thought.

Sens. John McCain and Barack Obama may spar over Social Security and tinker around the edges of the entitlement programs Americans know best, but neither has a serious plan to stabilize our retirement foundation and provide a true safety net for the elderly.

That's unfortunate, because both campaigns are missing out on an opportunity to engage and win over one of the most active and influential American voting blocs - senior citizens and mature adults.

How we pay for the long-term-care needs of 80 million baby boomers, the first of whom are retiring this year, promises to be one of our nation's most serious social and fiscal challenges.

AARP data show that only 35 percent of people 65 and older think they will need long-term care in the future. But nearly 70 percent of those turning 65 this year actually will require it, according to Congressional Quarterly.

The Urban Institute has reported that long-term care is a leading cause of catastrophic out-of-pocket costs for families. Yet few people have insurance coverage for long-term care.

Part of the problem is that the nation's system of long-term care is plagued by financial constraints and public misconceptions.

A recent poll found that 85 percent of Americans believe their long-term needs will be met by Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, or their existing health insurance. They are wrong. Social Security, Medicare and health insurance do not cover long-term care, and Medicaid covers care only for the very poor.

The case is clear: America is heading toward a fiscal tsunami unless it acts now. And surviving this wave will involve monumentally more than just shoring up the three key retirement pillars: Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

The solution to our long-term care crisis should not - and cannot - be just another costly government-funded mandate.

To finally begin taking control of this issue, candidates and elected officials alike must understand that now is the time for the federal government to gradually shift from acting as the major payer for long-term care to helping individuals save and invest for their own long-term care, using a variety of market-based mechanisms that enable compounding interest and time to work for us, not against us.

In effect, expanding reliance on private-sector markets would constitute a fourth pillar - supplementary to Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid - to stabilize a wobbling, crumbling retirement-program foundation.

For all the talk we hear about repaying our "Greatest Generation," both candidates should be calling for a bipartisan national commission to address long-term-care reform.

The last time our nation seized the opportunity to address the fiscal shortcomings of a key retirement pillar was the landmark 1983 National Commission on Social Security Reform, established by President Ronald Reagan. McCain recently called for a similar discussion - but only for Social Security. That's not enough.

Rather than banging heads in a Social Security debate that's dominated by superficial "conservative" and "liberal" labels more than by any real proposals for reform, our leaders should be putting their heads together to solve the problem of long-term care.

America's population is old and getting older fast. Census numbers show the number of older Americans will almost double between 2005 and 2030. We need and deserve a vigorous discussion on the long-term-care crisis facing this country.

Bipartisan reform of decades-old programs - which were designed in a different era to solve fundamentally different historical challenges - is not an option. It is a necessity.

It's time both presidential aspirants stop sidestepping this domestic priority and start stepping up with answers.

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