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Lincoln forum highlighted presidential candidates' health care proposals

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LINCOLN — Sen. Chuck Hagel and former Sen. Bob Kerrey said Thursday that the health care proposals of the two presidential candidates contain elements that could help the nation's system.

Kerrey, a Democrat, said John McCain's proposal could be best for the long term, while Barack Obama's might be best for the short term.

Kerrey and Hagel, a Republican, spoke during and after a health care forum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Kerrey said the tie between jobs and insurance needs to be loosened and consumers need to take more control of their own health insurance coverage.

McCain's plan could gradually shift some people away from job-based coverage through his proposal that would tax employer-sponsored health benefits and offer tax credits for people to purchase insurance on their own.

Obama's plans would require children to have health insurance and would establish a government-regulated clearinghouse where consumers could purchase coverage.

Hagel did not specify which parts of the two candidates' plans would most benefit the country. He said both have been careful not to propose changes that would be too radical.

He said solving the country's health care problems cannot be left only to politicians. He said other groups need to play a role.

Hagel also said the current financial crisis will force a complete reorganization of U.S. spending priorities.

It will take courage, he said, to focus spending on areas such as overhauling the health care system.

"This financial crisis — and it is a crisis — is going to reorient everything," Hagel said.

Sponsors of the forum were AARP, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and Prairie Fire Newspaper.

This report includes material from the Associated Press.

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