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President and Lawmakers Debate Health Reform at Bipartisan Summit

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On February 25, President Obama and approximately three dozen members of Congress participated in a day-long bipartisan summit where they debated solutions for health reform.

The summit began with opening remarks by the President, who expressed interest in identifying areas where Democrats and Republicans agree on health reform issues and then bridging the gap in areas where there is disagreement. He described the new White House proposal as a blend of the Senate and House bills and noted that Republicans have offered corresponding ideas for addressing insurance reforms, choice and competition, and other priority issues.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN) delivered opening remarks on behalf of Republicans, suggesting that Congress and the President should “start over” and focus on reducing health care costs. He said that the health care system is too big, too complicated and too decentralized to reform through a comprehensive bill. Alexander identified several possible solutions: small business health plans; allowing people to cross state lines to purchase health insurance; medical malpractice reforms; improvements to Health Savings Accounts; and incentives for states to lower costs.

The summit included extended discussion on four major topics: cost containment; insurance reforms, deficit reduction, and expanding coverage. At the conclusion of the summit, the President offered his analysis of where Democrats and Republicans stand on the following issues:

- **Insurance Market Reforms:** The President said there is agreement on the need for some insurance market reforms and that health insurance plans should be regulated.
- **Exchanges:** The President said there is agreement that small businesses and individuals should be part of a large group, but he emphasized that a health insurance exchange is not a government takeover of health care.



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- **Interstate Sale of Insurance:** The President noted that the two parties differ on the details of an arrangement that would allow people to purchase health insurance coverage across state lines. He questioned whether this issue could be addressed in a way that provides some baseline protections.
- **Medical Malpractice Reform:** The President expressed concern about imposing “hard caps” on damages, but he indicated a willingness to consider incentives for state-based programs to reduce defensive medicine.
- **Providing Coverage for the Uninsured and Persons With Preexisting Conditions:** The President noted that Democrats and Republicans differ in their solutions to this problem, and that the disagreements may be “a bridge too far to gap.”
- **Cost Containment:** The President said there is a lot of agreement on this issue, including the need to reduce medical errors, incentivize greater coordination among doctors, improve price transparency, and promote prevention.

President Obama urged Republicans to consider whether they could support additional components of health reform. He suggested that the dialogue would continue if there is additional movement. However, the President cautioned that if there is no further common ground, he expects that Senate and House leaders will be having discussions about procedural options for passing health reform. He also emphasized that he believes health reform should be addressed “quickly” without going through another year-long debate.

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