



Teresa Heinz Kerry and Jeffrey Lewis: Bipartisan coalition -- Let R.I. lead the way in drug coverage

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IT ALMOST seems impossible. But last month an unlikely coalition -- legislators from both parties, led by Rhode Island state Rep. Paul Moura and state Sen. Rhoda Perry; Lt. Gov. Charles Fogarty; the Rhode Island AFL-CIO; the Rhode Island Alliance for Retired Americans; and the pharmaceutical manufacturers' lobbying group, PhRMA -- came together at the Rhode Island State House to endorse a proposed prescription-drug discount program named "Rhode Island's Best Rx."

Congress and the White House, note: This bipartisan legislation would improve the access to and affordability of prescription medicines for more than 110,000 uninsured Rhode Islanders. More than that, it would prove that when political considerations are cast aside, governments really can find effective ways to help citizens.

For starters, it's a good plan. Rhode Island's Best Rx would use the state's bulk-purchasing power to make drugs more affordable for the 110,000 mostly elderly Rhode Islanders who have no prescription-drug insurance. The state would use its bargaining power to cut the prescription-drug costs of the uninsured by 30 to 40 percent.

This would be a great boost for the state, especially for the small businesses that cannot afford to insure their workers. It's targeted to people who need it.

All uninsured people 60 and older would qualify for Rhode Island's Best Rx, as would disabled Rhode Islanders 55 and older and uninsured Rhode Islanders under 60 with household incomes of less than 250 percent of the federal poverty level (\$24,500 for individuals, \$33,000 for married couples, and not more than \$50,000 for a household of four).

Imagine how many more Medicare recipients would have been helped had the federal government offered a discount card like Rhode Island's Best Rx, instead of the nightmarish Medicare Part D.

But perhaps the most intriguing thing about this proposed program is the broad coalition behind it. In Washington, our leaders often seem to pursue partisan advantage at the

expense of real solutions to urgent challenges. And national organizations seem incapable of considering more than their own short-term self-interest.

But in Rhode Island, members of both parties and organizations with very different agendas came together to find a market-based solution to a pressing problem -- embracing both the best tradition of the free-enterprise system and the creative use of government power.

Rather than spinning its wheels on a Rube Goldberg plan like the Republican-crafted Medicare prescription-drug program, Rhode Island had a chance to lead the nation in helping people in need. It took that chance and made the most of it. The state's commitment to helping the uninsured -- many of whom have no voice, no advocate, and no home -- is inspiring.

For those who cannot afford their medication, acute illnesses can rapidly become chronic, bringing increased economic costs and physical tolls on sufferers. And preventable illnesses cost caregivers and the state millions of dollars in the delayed and more expensive treatments after patients land in emergency rooms -- or worse.

The prescription-drug crisis affects every state. Many Republicans in Congress lack the courage to revise Medicare Part D; they seem unable to craft a better alternative or to forge a clear consensus.

Without actions like those taking place in Rhode Island, no one will get help. What that state has done can be a model for the nation. The need is great, and the time is now!

Teresa Heinz Kerry is chairwoman of the Heinz Family Philanthropies and wife of U.S. Sen. John Kerry. Jeffrey Lewis is president of the Heinz Family Philanthropies (jlewis@heinzoffice.org).