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Rising health care costs must be addressed

John Topp

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I recently had the privilege of meeting and chatting with a corporate executive who earned \$500,000 last year at a profitable company. This person is a professional and at the top of his field -- a traditional American success story.

This person also has a support staff with an average wage of about \$40,000. These wages are average for these positions.

We discussed health care costs and, in particular, passing along the increasing cost of premiums to employees. We agreed that American business can't afford to continue to absorb the cost. Our discussion also included other issues, such as 85 percent of health care cost is incurred in the last year of life, the health care industry is now a for-profit industry, the desire for the best health care -- no matter the cost -- when your life is in danger, and how, at some point, we might go to work every day only to pay for health care.

The professional said he could not believe what the payroll reports for staff members revealed: Employees were now paying a significantly higher share of the health premiums, resulting in a significantly reduced take-home pay. As a matter of this fact, some checks were cut in half.

My initial reaction was if he and the 100 other highly compensated executives in his company reduced their salaries by \$50,000 each, would it not enable his employees to stay above the poverty line? Could he get by on \$450,000 each year?

This American dilemma is nobody's fault. As easy as it is to be cynical, look to the business success story above and say you should pay more because you earned more, it is equally difficult to say we are going to penalize you for being successful. After all, this is America, where if you work hard you can succeed with no limit. But at what cost?

A need, not a want

This is a country of consumerism. Our entire economic success is based on producing and selling goods and services. It is based on peoples' wants and needs and fulfilling them.

Health care is a need, not a want -- and a need none of us want to have to buy. Health services are also an area where regardless of wealth; the cost of fulfilling the need is the same. We need transportation so we buy a car. The type of car we buy is usually determined by what one can afford. With health care, we have no choice in what to buy, as with our American values, only the best will do.

It's clear that we all need to seek solutions rather than focus on the problem. The level of health care is not the problem -- we have the best available in the world. The problem, finding a way to pay for it, affects virtually everyone in the country. We have it within our power to find a solution. Wisconsin should become part of the solution. Our public and private leadership has a rich history of solving tough issues with integrity, respect and trust. Each of us must carry a share of this burden to find a better health care system.

Let's work together to protect Wisconsin residents from the financial disaster health problems can create. Without penalizing the wealthy or creating hardship with the masses, we do have wealth right here at home to accomplish solving this dilemma. Hopefully, we can find the will.

John Topp is the executive director of the Construction Labor Management Council of Southeast Wisconsin Inc. and the Building Advantage initiative.