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## Navigation

[. Create new post](#)

## Home

### Transcript of Gravel at the SEIU Health Care Forum

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*Sen. Mike Gravel and the other candidates for the Democratic Presidential Nomination attended a special forum on health care in Nevada on March 24, 2007, which was co-sponsored by the Center for American Progress Action Fund and Service Employees International Union.*

*The following is a transcript of Senator Mike Gravel's speech at the Center for American Progress's Health Forum.*

KAREN TUMULTY: Thank you very much. And now we are going to move on to our final candidate of the day, former Alaska Senator Mike Gravel.

MIKE GRAVEL: Hi, all. I just want to give my condolences to all of you who realized that something sad happened last night: The Rebels lost by four points. I know what that means to you. I also want to point out that, Andy is sitting over there. Andy, I have to tell you, you speak good English. I don't understand why candidates don't understand you. I want to thank you for getting me here. It's better than what CNN is going to do to me in New Hampshire by censoring my voice. But I also want to thank John Podesta. But let me say that Andy pointed out one thing right in the beginning is that we do have a problem, and I don't want to take your time when you know as well as I do. We've heard a lot of anecdotal experiences and deep emotions about the problem. That's not a solution. That's not a solution. What's wrong with health care in this country is that we saddle the business community with carrying it, and they can't do it because it's going to cost you your jobs, it's going to cost -- it's going to damage you internationally.

Why? Karen was alluding to it. Historical accident. In [the] second World War when wages were frozen, the only way you could get people to come into your company and work was to give them a lot of health care benefits. The war is over and we don't have this freeze on wages, so we don't need that system to go ahead and carry. And if you heard all of the blame, they essentially, except for Dennis, they were all involving employers and employees. That is a non-starter and it's a Band-Aid that is not going to work.

Now, what can we do? Oh, well, real simple. We can turn around and say let's have a health care program that establishes equality. And I'll give you the name of it. It's called the universal single-payer -- by single-payer I mean all Americans pay for it regardless of the system you have now but the system you're going to get, single-payer Health Care Voucher plan.

Under the plan we would issue vouchers to every single American. And the vouchers, you don't pay for them, they're issued to you. You sign up every year for them. And the vouchers will have a very modest co-pay, a very modest deductible, but that's it. Everybody gets the same product universally in the United States of America. And then if you want more than the product you got, you pay for it.

There's no magic in this whole process. Somebody is going to pay. You know who pays, it's the average American, one way or the other, particular under our present system. And so to want to trash the business community and trash our tax system, which is already corrupt, with greater corruption as a way to solve the problem is a non-starter. When they tell you about oh, you know, I've done this, done that, keep in mind Harry Truman was the first to raise this issue with the Democrats, and they didn't do it and we haven't done it since, and so it's been a little Band-Aid one on top of the other.

Now, with these vouchers you'll be able to have choice: Choice of doctors, choice of hospitals, free choice. Now, you'll be able to also have a choice of maybe no more than five or six plans, insurance plans. Now, I have my suspicions with the predator[y] activities under our present mercantile system where you have your lobbyists, 30,000 in Washington, go out and make sure that they take care of their clients.

So there's going to be some changes made in the future, depends on how this is enacted into law. And it's not going to be enacted by the Congress. Don't hold your breath on that please. Never will happen, for the very simple reason that there's too many interests, 30,000 lobbyists. Who do you think is bundling all these millions of dollars to the presidential candidates? It isn't coming from the Holy Trinity. My God, it's coming from vital special interests, whether they're for Democrats or Republicans, that's what you're faced with.

So now you're going to have a voucher. You got the freedom of choice. You got the freedom of choice in plans. Now, you might have a public plan if we don't see the insurance industry and the pharmaceutical

industry shaping up. So now you got public assistance. But let's have like public assistance, let's have a central body called a health care board with regional boards that they would then define what the various vouchers are for.

And the vouchers are set up for risk on an individual basis, not on a collective this fits all, because if you're young, you probably don't have a cost of more than \$3,000. When you're my age, it could be \$150, \$180 thousand in one year, which is what I got hit with and I went bankrupt as a result of that.

So make no misunderstandings, I know the system. I get my meds from the VA and I get the rest from the Medicare. So I know the system up front and personal, and I don't have to tell you about somebody in Benton, Iowa crying on my shoulder. Let me point out to you, so what will happen, when I'm talking individually designed, we're going to have electronic records. Hell, that's nothing. We have to have your entire history computerized, and every penny that's spent on your health care computerized all the time so that when we're really redesigning next year, we're going to turn around and project that oh, you spent 3,000 last year, we're going to give you a voucher for 3,000 the next year. But suppose you've got colon cancer so it costs you \$150,000 next year?

That's going to be the size of your voucher. You begin to see the dynamics of this. And by putting in, and with only having five or six plans, and the plans would determine and there will be no lemon-dropping. There will be no, well, you don't qualify, you got a preexisting condition.

That is history under this plan. So this plan can work. All we need to do as they say, oh, you've got to bring the people in. My God, bringing people in. They're not bringing people anywhere. They're just trying to create an attitude of that, my God, we're going to do something great for the people. Hell, the people are not empowered to do anything. In the United States more than half of the American people make laws at a state, local level.

Why can't we do that at the federal level? If you did then of course you decide what is the health plan you want to have or if you want to continue to put up with the mandates that we're experiencing. So how are we going to pay for my health care will get done, and I want to thank my advisors, Dr. Fuse and Dr. Politnocoff as both experts in the field that have been advising me. They'd be ashamed the way that I presented it, but I think not. I think not.

And so I would just say that if we empower you, then you could make the decision and not try to -- it's what they're saying. They're saying we want you people to use the government for your benefit, okay. Why don't you just -- why do you have to do that? Why can't you do it directly? You can't. There's a way to do it. Go to [Gravel08.us](http://Gravel08.us) and you'll see the process to be able to do it. Thank you very much.

KAREN TUMULTY: Thank you, Senator. It sounds like the plan that you're describing about your standards right have some of the elements of single-payer but also some of the elements of a medical savings account. It's not a sort of traditional, pure single-payer plan. And you described this as something that would never come from Congress. And so can you describe again this process by which -- what kind of process are you talking about here?

MIKE GRAVEL: I'm talking about using the National Initiative. First for this to happen, and I've got to tell you you're not going to have an alternative because 10 years from now, 15 years from now you're going to have the problem getting worse. You're all right about that. It's getting worse all the time. But don't worry about that. You think that that's going to cause him to solve, the Congress to solve the problem? Look at this country. We're literally bankrupt. We're literally bankrupt and nobody pays any attention to it. We've got these crazy wars. We have a nation that's controlled by the military industrial conflict that dictates what's happening to your lives, and the Americans are just whistling walking through the cemetery. So I don't know if I've answered your question.

KAREN TUMULTY: This National Initiative, how does that work?

MIKE GRAVEL: How does it work?

KAREN TUMULTY: In terms of the petition and it starts as what?

MIKE GRAVEL: Well, I don't want to take the time to go through this whole process, but understand what I've done is I've copied the procedures that are used in the Congress and every legislative body in the world and I've put them into a law called the National Ballot Initiative. And that is to equip every single American to become lawmakers to come into the operation of government as lawmakers and partners with their elected officials. Now, this is revolutionary. This is out of the box. You know what it means is we trust the American people. Isn't that revolutionary? We trust the people, rather the other politicians say trust me, I'll get elected, I'm going to do the job for you.

I've got news for you, can't be done that way. And we have historic precedence to show it. And if that doesn't convince you that we're not going in the right direction electing various personalities president and thinking

that's going to make the change, I've got to tell you, the change lies with you, not the leadership. The leadership has been screwing up by the numbers for the last 50 years. Have you had enough yet? Please.

KAREN TUMULTY: Senator, there was a question that I had in my mind about this, and it's addressed by one of our questioners in the audience, and interestingly enough at this very moment a question over email popped up that addressed the same issue. You described these vouchers as addressing the specific conditions you have. You need a heart bypass, you get a voucher that would cover it. But Michelle in Iowa asked how would you increase the role of prevention in the American health care system? And I'd, in fact, like to turn to Becky, and I apologize in advance, is it Estraya or Estralla, who's an RN at UHS Valley Hospital. Are you here, Becky?

BECKY ESTRAYA: I have been a nurse for 37 years and I have seen patients come into the hospital with medical problems that could have been prevented if a doctor had seen this patient early on. As president how will you ensure that more efforts for preventive and wellness care is provided nationwide?

MIKE GRAVEL: First off, there is a role for the president in his leadership capacity, or her leadership capacity, and that is to change the culture, to really energize people to exercise. Now, people say at my age that, you know, I'm a good example. I've had two major operations, several major operations, but I'm in good shape because I exercise. I try to eat the right foods.

And so I have a lady on the plane that showed me that she could have got this junk bar for 50 cents but they were asking for a dollar 25 for the apple which she was holding up about to eat. Doesn't that tell you something about the dynamics of what's going on? I mean, we're all patriotic, whether it's in business, whether it's in labor, we're all patriotic.

But we need a leadership that sets a tone, that sets a tone to demand from us the best that's in us. We recognize these problems. We know the problem of obesity. I try to diet all the time, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so successfully. But when all you've got in your field of vision is junk food, you got problems. And that's the problem that the president can bully but not giving you. He's going to regulate all this. I got to tell you, look what happened with Katrina. You know, you heard the joke, I'm from the federal government and I'm here to help you. Well, that doesn't work.

The government is a tool. The people can use it. But if the people have the direct power to use it, now you get to see government as a real tool, not the tool you have where the special interests determine how the tools of government is handled by the lobbyists and the bundling to pay for the people who pay for their campaign to manipulate you to vote for them. That's the process that we live under and that's process that has to change.

KAREN TUMULTY: Next I'd like to turn to Fabiola, is it Pavol? Pavel? Who's a janitor in Clark County. Fabiola, are you here?

FABIOLA PAVA: Pava.

KAREN TUMULTY: Pava, I apologize. I didn't even come close, but I have a hard time with Tumulty so I understand the issue.

FABIOLA PAVA: My name is Fabiola Pava and I'm an SEIU member. I work for Clark County as a janitor. I'm also a primary caregiver for my 78-year-old mother. My mother has Medicare and the problem lies in that the providers will not use diagnostic tests and treatments that will diagnose her sooner and treat the problem faster. The question is what is your plan for providing preventative and diagnostic services for health care for our seniors, people with disabilities and all Americans?

MIKE GRAVEL: One of the facets of the plan would be to keep in place Medicare and Medicaid and phase them out over time. Because plans to put everybody on Medicare aren't going to fly financially and just can't be met. And so they can tell you they can, but they can't be met. We are in deep economic difficulty and in debt. So when you talk about the seniors, this is where you have these health regional boards where in that region they'll be defining what goes into these various vouchers. And they'll change every year depending upon your personal history as you get older.

And we know it costs less for young people and it costs more for old people. That's just the nature of the situation. So I don't have any magic to take care of the seniors. All I can say is I can set up a structure that will have checks and balances where they'll have a better say, they'll have a better say than they have today. Seventy-seven million people are going to be retiring in the next 25 years. Those are the baby boomers. That's twice the amount of people, the adult, the senior people that exist today. If there's a group that's going to benefit from the National Ballot Initiative, it's going to be the seniors, because they'll have more clout to be able to vote for programs that they feel will address their particular needs.

That's the answer that I would offer to you, not a magic wand from Mike Gravel as president, it's from the people being involved directly with the power to make laws on policy issues that affect your lives. That doesn't exist today, and there's nobody running for president, Democrat or Republican, that's even suggested

that. Oh, they talk about big changes. They're cosmetic changes and they're Band-Aids to the problems we face in this country.

KAREN TUMULTY: Could I ask a follow-up that I think is to the premise of Fabiola's question, if I'm understanding correctly, which is that, and have you found that in your own experience as a patient and also as a policymaker that elderly patients in particular that the medical system doesn't seem to have the same aggressiveness and the same sort of curiosity? Is that sort of what you were getting at here in terms of diagnostic testing and the kind of treatment that elderly patients receive?

MIKE GRAVEL: Maybe I didn't answer her. Doctors do a lot of testing today to cover their backside, you know, because they don't want to be sued. One of the features of these regional boards is we're going to do away with what we see that the attorneys love, and that is to go sue doctors or raise the costs where they can't even stay in business. The same thing with nurses. That's got to go. Now, you want to see how much money the trial lawyers are pouring into the presidential campaign? Just as a couple of young people out there doing their blogging and putting that data up, look at that data, that answers the whole question.

So we can't have everything. You cannot have everything. And so you can have a basic plan that will cover. And the way the plan is designed, it won't raise costs, because the 30 percent that they're talking about is paper cost. If you took that and put it into some real costs in health care, we'd cover everybody without raising any costs. But you do have to recognize that you can't have everything you want. You can't have a burp and run to the doctor. You got to be responsible as citizens. And that goes back to this whole preventative medicine where we change the culture. That will help to lower the cost, but also until we're totally in a new culture in that regard, we have to have some discipline on what the basic package will be.

And that is a decision -- and you want to raise the basic package and you're a lawmaker, put an initiative up. Let's say we're going to raise the cost, rather than seven percent for the package, the basic package, we're going to raise it to 10 percent. Let the people decide. That's the slogan of my campaign, let the people decide. Why should the politicians be also on the mission in this area and they know it all when they can't even produce a decent plan. I hope that addresses your follow-up question.

KAREN TUMULTY: We have about one minute left, and so I wanted to ask you your slogan, let the people decide. What's your plan from here on out? You come into this race without a lot of name recognition, without a lot of money, without big organizations. Where do you go from here?

MIKE GRAVEL: Well, the problem with not a lot of money can be solved by the people who hear my voice. It's not going to be the lobbyists bundling money for me. It's not going to be the corporations that are going to be giving me money through their executives giving me the money. It's going to be if my voice can be heard. And I don't need the 50 million, 100 million dollars -- or a million dollars that they're going to spend. All I need is a modicum of money, around \$10 million and I'll win. I'll win because I'll be able to get to the American people and say the solution is with you. It's not with the leaders.

And if I can become president, and lightning would have to strike for that to happen, but, you know something, you know something, lightning has struck all the time in presidential elections, all the time. Anything is possible in politics, and I could be your next president. I could be your next president. And if you're worried about my age, don't.

We can get a young man who's vice president. There's a few around. I hope I've answered your question.

KAREN TUMULTY: Thank you very much, Senator. I think anything is possible, and politics is a terrific way to end today.

MIKE GRAVEL: Thank you.

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