

The year opened with health care reform as the hot-button issue, but the H1N1 influenza quickly took over the airwaves.

The World Health Organization, which is coordinating the global response to the flu, quickly raised its pandemic alert status to Level 5, one step below its highest warning level. The flu continues to infect people, but health officials are reporting that this strain of influenza is milder than initially feared.

Regardless of the outcome of this virus, this outbreak has shown that we must dedicate additional funds to preparing for a more widespread, dangerous pandemic. Our nation's health care infrastructure must be prepared to deal with a pandemic.

While the H1N1 influenza may have taken over the headlines, Congress is keeping an eye on the bigger picture. One important bill that was enacted early this year was an expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program. This legislation provides health coverage for 11 million children, including 4 million children who previously lacked insurance. With rising unemployment, this bill is more important than ever.

And broader health care reform is still very much on the table. I believe it's past time that we reform a health care system that leaves too many Americans uninsured and is becoming far too expensive for working families.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said it best: "Reforming America's health care system to control costs and ensure that everyone has affordable care that meets their needs is central to long-term economic recovery and growth. We are committed to working together to advance health reform legislation that meets the objectives laid out by President Obama."

Locally, I'm still working on fixing a problem with Medicare reimbursement that has plagued our doctors in Monterey, San Benito and Santa Cruz counties for years. Years ago, Central Coast counties were declared "rural," meaning our doctors receive lower reimbursement than those in neighboring counties even though our counties have become far

more urban.

I will soon introduce legislation to correct this problem. We've already seen some positive signs this year, including a meeting between my staff and other key players in this issue. It's my hope that a solution to this problem will be included in overarching health care legislation later this year.

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