



Congressman Steve Kagen: 'throw the long ball' on health care

U.S. Rep. Dr. Steve Kagen recently made history as only the second Democrat elected to serve more than two terms in Wisconsin's 8th Congressional district. The longtime physician sat down with Insight Editor Margaret LeBrun to share his views on the financial market and auto industry bailouts, as well as his plan to fix the national health insurance crisis.

THE 8TH CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT of Northeastern Wisconsin mirrors the face of America today. When I grew up here in Appleton, in 1955 the old YMCA had a sign on the outside that said, "No Negroes allowed in town after dark." Louis Armstrong came to entertain at the chapel at Lawrence College (at that time), but Satchmo couldn't stay in town — and Ella Fitzgerald, as well. When I grew up here it was Caucasian only, and a generation forward, it's multicultural, multilingual and multifaceted — and we are a richer community because of it.

I didn't ever believe I would need to run for United States Congress. I thought that just being behind the

scenes, contributing, writing letters, e-mails, making contributions to other candidates that things would change. But I ran for Congress in 2006 because the rate of change for health care was not rapid enough. I couldn't fix health care nationally by becoming a mayor or county executive or at the state level, so I had to run for federal office.

In 2008 with the election of President-elect Barack Obama, I expect {Democrats} to throw the long ball, in football parlance. We have to begin to think differently in America if we are going to make progress, because we are facing some major issues.

I voted against the financial market bailout after consulting with [continued] »

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economic experts across the country and with our 8th District advisory council. I didn't feel the (Secretary of the Treasury Henry) Paulson and (President George W.) Bush bailout plan would accomplish the goals of first, catching and punishing the crooks, and second, cleaning up the economic mess, and the credit crisis, the liquidity crisis. And third, it didn't offer any written regulations to guarantee that this would never happen again.

The auto industry is a very complex case. Our economy depends on our auto manufacturing industry. So I'm willing to consider a bridge loan for General Motors and for Ford, but not at all for Chrysler. Chrysler is owned by the Cerberus Corp. which is a private equity LLC. The private equity people at Cerberus also own New Page, which are the paper mills they have recently shuttered in Kimberly and in

Niagara. So, if Cerberus needs to raise cash for their other company and their other investment in Chrysler, they can sell the Niagara plant and the mill in Kimberly, which was highly profitable at the time they closed it. Think of it this way: The people in Kimberly who lost their jobs are now being asked by the Cerberus Corp. to pay for Cerberus's mistakes. It's immoral, it's outrageous and it just won't sell.

The way I view any auto manufacturer owned here in the U.S. is they're really in the health care business, because \$1,500 per new car being produced by GM is a health care legacy cost. The high cost of health care has crippled almost every business, every local government and state government. So we have to find a meaningful solution for our health care crisis. We have to guarantee access to affordable care for everyone and there is a way to do it.

Once you become ill, today, insurance companies are allowed to discriminate against you and cherry pick you out of that risk pool. I believe we have to apply our Constitutional guarantees that protect us from discrimination by the health care industry. And when we do that, we will immediately have access to care. It will provide comprehensive coverage, where no insurance company can say no to you due to a preexisting condition.

We need to use the marketplace to leverage down prices for all of us. To say, if you're a citizen living within a given metropolitan area, you can pick up your cell phone, and you can Google the medication you're looking for and you'll get a map of where you can find your medication at what price. I want the insurance industry to compete for your hard-earned dollars. ①