

Urgent Care in the Crosshairs

■ CAMILLE BONTA, MHS

Healthcare will be a defining issue for many voters this year, on the basis that many Republicans in Congress still want to repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA). Yet, on many healthcare issues, there is little daylight between Republicans and Democrats, and healthcare providers commonly find allies in both parties.

Elections provide a tremendous opportunity to educate candidates, including incumbents, because they are more interested in what you have to say before election day than after. Take the threat to urgent care in Massachusetts, for example.

This summer, Massachusetts state lawmakers proposed to impose new regulations on urgent care centers and to levy an 8.75% tax on center charges. Passage of the legislation would have been a terminal event for urgent care in Massachusetts and would have established an alarming model for other states to replicate. The North East Regional Urgent Care Association and the Urgent Care Association teamed up, and urgent care center operators from Massachusetts were called into action. We are pleased to report that the bill failed to advance before the close of the legislative session. From the experience, we learned that many lawmakers don't understand urgent care and that advocacy efforts would have been aided by pre-established relationships among urgent care center operators, their providers, and state lawmakers. It is a certainty that urgent care centers in Massachusetts and other states will be under threat again next year. Urgent care centers need to position themselves and should use the elections as a platform.

At the Urgent Care Convention and Expo in Las Vegas last May, I provided perspective on 10 ways the healthcare landscape had changed since the start of 2017. I highlighted actions by Congress and the Trump administration that are contributing to this reshaping, which occurred largely as an after-effect of Congress's failure to repeal the ACA.

Other events, including continued healthcare consolidation



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and rising healthcare premiums that force Americans into high-deductible plans, also have profound effects on the healthcare landscape, creating challenges—but also opportunities.

And a new level of acknowledgement by policymakers that not all healthcare regulations lead to better care has spawned federal initiatives like Patients Over Paperwork, Meaningful Measures, and Red Tape Relief.

The urgent care community must lend some critical thinking to how it can take advantage of a shifting healthcare landscape, which includes engaging with policymakers.

In Washington, a bipartisan group of senators is interested in improving the transparency of healthcare cost and quality. The Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, charged with making recommendations to Congress, is examining the role of urgent care in delivering care to Medicare beneficiaries. Dramatic changes to the way Medicare pays for evaluation and management services are being considered. And, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has acknowledged the uniqueness of urgent care by creating an urgent care medicine specialty measure set for quality reporting.

The attention on urgent care has never been greater, and UCA is engaged nationally with a seat at important tables, but urgent care center owners, operators, and providers are the foot soldiers. Advocacy involvement at the local, state, and federal levels needs to become part of the business model for urgent care centers. For those who have disregarded the importance of engaging with elected officials and other policymakers, this is a paradigm shift—and a necessary one. ■