



## Gingrich sees R.I. as springboard for nationwide health-care reform

The former House speaker says the nation's smallest state is a perfect place to be a model for saving lives and costs.

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**BY G. WAYNE MILLER**

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PROVIDENCE -- America must remake its convoluted and inefficient system of health care or countless lives will continue to be lost and billions of dollars will continue to be wasted, Newt Gingrich, former Republican House speaker, said yesterday.

"It's literally a matter of life and death," Gingrich said.

That was the grim assessment at a morning-long bipartisan conference of government, business and civic leaders at the Rhode Island School of Design. But there's a silver lining, Gingrich and other officials agreed: With its small size and growing consensus that inaction is unconscionable, **Rhode Island has the rare chance to serve as a national model for change.**

"There's a real opportunity here not just for business but the entire community," Gingrich said to the news media after the conference. "We can have a more effective and less expensive system."

Yesterday's session was organized by Governor Carcieri and Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy, who was busy in Washington with end-of-year business but sent a videotape outlining his views.

Also attending were Lt. Gov. Charles J. Fogarty and some 40 heads of business, including Alfred J. Verrecchia, president and CEO of Hasbro, and Howard G. Sutton, publisher of The Providence Journal. Rhode Island School of Design president Roger Mandle, a participant, welcomed the conferees to the school's Museum of Art.

Gingrich, who was speaker of the House from 1995 to 1999, has made what he calls "transformation" of the nation's health care his new cause. Gingrich is the founder of the Center for Health Transformation -- a role that belies the hard-bitten image of his days in Washington. He took up the health-care crusade, he

told The Journal, because he wants to save lives and money -- and he believes that change is feasible, if difficult.

Gingrich told conferees that true reform must be built on a triad of changes:

Prevention and "wellness" programs, so that people remain healthier longer, thus reducing -- or never needing -- high-cost treatments. As an example, he pointed to childhood obesity, which predisposes many youngsters to diabetes, a potentially deadly and often costly disease. Said Carcieri: "We've got a 'sick-care' system, not a health-care system." The governor in October launched a series of initiatives to improve the health of all state residents.

State-of-the-art information technology, to bring together all of a person's records in one digitized, easily accessible source. Too often now, records are scattered among various doctors, hospitals and providers -- none of whom readily communicate, to the detriment of all. Gingrich compared health information to FedEx, the Atlanta-based shipper whose automated tracking system revolutionized the delivery business. "We know more about where a package will be in a few days than we do about our health care," Gingrich said.

"Individual-centered" care, which would allow consumers to be better informed. Thus "empowered," Gingrich maintained, consumers could make more knowledgeable decisions, thereby bettering their health. Although he does not advocate a government-run universal health-care program like Canada's, which is frequently criticized as delay-plagued, Gingrich says that all of America's nearly 300 million people should have coverage, from private or public sources, or a mix of the two.

Carcieri gave business leaders three charges: enroll every employee in a wellness program; participate in the recently established CEO Council of the Rhode Island Business Group on Health; and support, with money and participation, the Rhode Island Quality Institute, a nonprofit health-care study group formed by former Attorney General Sheldon Whitehouse.

"This is the number-one policy issue in the country," Carcieri said. "My goal is to make Rhode Island the model for the nation for health care."

According to Gingrich, health-care costs represent about 15 percent of the nation's domestic economic output, making change an enormous challenge. "When you're trying to move 15 percent of the economy," he said, "it's a big project."

That makes starting in Rhode Island sensible, Gingrich said. "It's about the right size for everyone to talk as a community."

Although the news media was not invited to yesterday's conference, officials answered questions and provided copies of the documents that were presented.

Visit Gingrich's Center for Health Transformation at [www.healthtransformation.net](http://www.healthtransformation.net)

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