



**New York**  
330 7th Avenue, Suite 1902  
New York, NY 10001  
phone: (212) 213 2113  
fax: (212) 213 2233

**Philadelphia**  
8459 Ridge Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19128  
phone: (215) 483 4004  
fax: (215) 483 4429

**Baltimore**  
3600 Clipper Mill Road, Suite 228  
Baltimore, MD 21218  
phone: (410) 366 4151  
fax: (410) 366 4083

**Los Angeles**  
2433 Main Street, Suite C  
Santa Monica, CA 90405  
phone: (310) 450 3390  
fax: (310) 450 2390

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## **Senator Barack Obama**

The following four issues were a priority for a substantial majority of participants. It is essential that we hear your views on these questions.

**ISSUE AREA: HEALTH CARE. Our health care system is in disarray. The cost of private health insurance is increasing at an annual rate in excess of 14 percent, far outpacing wages. Individuals are paying more out of pocket and receiving fewer benefits. 46.6 million Americans, including nine million children, are uninsured, and the number of uninsured is on the rise. States, suffering severe fiscal problems, are cutting eligibility and benefits in Medicaid and other health programs. Tens of thousands of people die from medical errors each year. Vital medical information continues to be withheld from pregnant women, sexually active teenagers, and populations at risk for STDs, while 87 percent of U.S. counties have no abortion provider.**

**As President, what will you do to solve our nation's health care crisis?**

As president, I will sign a universal health care plan into law by the end of my first term in office. I will modernize the U.S. health care system to improve quality and reduce costs; increase investment in public health to prepare and protect Americans against emerging health threats; and to reduce rates of preventable diseases. Finally, my plan will mandate health insurance coverage for every child in America.

My plan will also bring down the cost of health care and reduce the average family's premiums by as much as \$2500 through five important steps.

*First*, the federal government will pick up the tab for some of the most expensive illnesses and conditions, which means premiums will go down.

*Second*, we'll focus our health care system on preventing costly, debilitating conditions in the first place by requiring coverage of evidence-based, preventative care services, and making sure they are paid for.

*Third*, we'll reduce the cost of our health care by improving the quality of our health care. We'll ask hospitals and providers to collect, track, and publicly report measures of health care quality so that patients can make informed choices about the care that's best for them.

*Fourth*, we'll reduce waste and inefficiency by moving from a 20th century health care industry based on pen and paper to a 21st century industry that's paperless, reducing deadly medical errors, shortening the length of hospital stays, ensuring that nurses can spend less time on paperwork and more time with patients, and saving billions and billions of dollars in the process.

*Finally*, we'll break the stranglehold that a few big drug and insurance companies have on the health care market. Under my plan, we'll make generic drugs more available to consumers and we'll tell the drug companies that their days of forcing affordable

prescription drugs out of the market are over. And we'll investigate and prosecute the monopolization of the insurance industry.

I think any call for health care reform has to take prevention seriously. When you have 750,000 teen pregnancies and 4 million teens contracting an STD a year, that is an unnecessary cost to the system that we can avoid by investing in greater prevention. My health care will cover reproductive health care. And as president, I will ensure that we are providing our young people with comprehensive and medically-accurate age-appropriate sex education in our schools. I am an original co-sponsor of the Prevention First Act, which will ensure that we are teaching *both* abstinence and accurate sex education in our schools, and will end the practice of wasting billions in abstinence-only education that has been proven not to work. And to address the high pregnancy rates amongst African American and Latina teens, I have introduced the Communities of Color Teen Pregnancy Prevention Act of 2007. This bill directly addresses the issue of teenage pregnancy and STDs, through grants for community-based interventions targeting schools, families and the media, to support educational and health services for teenage women.

**ISSUE AREA: ENVIRONMENT. Our world is waking up to the implications of the damage we have done to our environment. The flow of ice from glaciers has doubled in the past decade. If nothing is done, sea levels could rise up to 20 feet. There are twice as many Category 4 and 5 hurricanes as there were 30 years ago. Without action, global warming will cause an estimated 300,000 deaths a year by 2035. Pollution continues to do damage. Nine million children have been diagnosed with asthma; between 1980 and 1994, the number of children under 5 with asthma increased by 160%. Each year, 1.8 million to 3.5 million illnesses are caused by swimming in water contaminated by sewage overflows and an additional 500,000 from drinking contaminated water.**

**As President, how will you address the crisis in climate change and the broader need to protect our environment?**

I believe that global warming is not just the greatest environmental challenge facing our planet—it is one of our greatest challenges of any kind. It is an issue that we ignore at our own peril and at even greater peril for our children, grandchildren, and many impoverished global populations. Combating global warming will be a top priority of my presidency, and I will attend to it personally.

Putting a price on carbon is the most important step we can take to reduce emissions. As president, my first priority to combat global warming will be enacting an economy-wide cap on U.S. carbon emissions that will reduce U.S. emissions by 80 percent by 2050, and I have cosponsored legislation introduced by Senators Bernard Sanders (I-VT) and Barbara Boxer (D-CA) that would achieve this result. I will also devote significant resources from a permit auction toward accelerating the development and deployment of low carbon technologies, addressing the economic challenges imposed on key industrial sectors, and providing meaningful incentives for action by developing countries.

Another top priority for my energy and global warming agenda will be changing the cars we drive and the fossil fuels we burn. This is not simply an important part of the next president's



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fax: (410) 366 4083

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phone: (310) 450 3390  
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environmental agenda. Reducing our dependence on foreign oil is equally critical to our national security. I will increase fuel efficiency standards by 4% per year, and lift the 60,000-per-manufacturer cap on buyer tax credits to encourage more Americans to buy ultra-efficient vehicles; and encourage automakers to make fuel-efficient hybrid vehicles. Domestic automakers will get either assistance shouldering their health care legacy costs in exchange for investing 50 percent of the savings into technology to produce more fuel-efficient vehicles or generous tax incentives for retooling assembly plants. I believe that the U.S. can and should be a global leader in the development of alternative energy sources, such as ethanol and other biofuels, as well as wind and solar. We should set benchmarks for production so that more companies will invest in ethanol production and create distribution facilities where the average consumer can access biofuels for cars designed to run on them.

To further change the fuels we burn, I proposed a National Low Carbon Fuel Standard that will reduce the lifecycle greenhouse gas emissions of passenger vehicle fuels sold in the U.S. by 10 percent in 2020 and require additional reductions of 1% annually thereafter.

Addressing global warming is one part of my broader environmental agenda. I am acutely aware that the health of our environment is inextricably linked to another one of today's most pressing issues: America's spiraling health care costs. In my Administration, environmental protection will be understood as a cornerstone of disease prevention. We need to preserve our parks, forests, farms and wilderness, because they are beautiful and deserve our protection, but also because without these places, our children will become more sedentary. Our children have a right to be protected from environmental toxins like mercury and lead poisoning, and we must confront diesel pollution and the other environmental triggers that have led to an explosion in pediatric asthma in urban and rural areas alike. We also need to remember that environmental degradation is just one more force that disproportionately hurts low-income and minority communities. In fulfilling this obligation to practice disease prevention, we will also be pursuing a more effective and economically efficient approach to health care.

Environmental health, including air pollution, will be a major priority of mine. For example, the EPA estimates that every year, more than one in six children could be at risk for developmental disorders because of mercury exposure in the mother's womb. This is unacceptable, and we can do better. As president, I will significantly reduce the amount of mercury that is deposited in oceans, lakes, and rivers, which in turn will reduce the amount that people ingest when eating fish.

Lead poisoning in children plummeted significantly since the banning of lead in paint and fuels -- yet today, there are 400,000 American children who continue to suffer from lead poisoning, most of these children from low-income families. As president, I will call on Congress to enact legislation I have introduced during my time in the Senate that would protect American children from lead poisoning. This legislation would prevent children's products from containing lead, provide incentives for property owners to eliminate or contain lead paint in homes with low-income young children or women of child-bearing age, and require that all child care facilities outside the home be lead-safe within five years.

**ISSUE AREA: EDUCATION. A high-quality public education is essential to ensure opportunity for all Americans. In 2000, 2 out of 3 fourth graders couldn't read proficiently and 7 out of 10 inner-city and rural fourth graders couldn't read at the most basic level. The most recent data on urban 12th graders finds that 84% are not proficient in math and 83% are not proficient in science. For students who do graduate, attending college now means taking on substantial debt as costs have risen and grants are scarce. Between 1994 and 2004, college costs skyrocketed by 30% and 26% at public and private colleges, respectively.**

**As President, how will you address the glaring deficiencies and persistent failures of so many schools in our public education system? How will you ensure access to higher education for all Americans?**

Every child in America, regardless of race, geographic location or economic situation, deserves a high-quality education, from outstanding early childhood programs to quality elementary, middle and high schools to affordable college education. I know from my own life what a good education can mean to a child. But I've also seen many young lives wasted, potential lost, and children robbed of their chance to succeed by schools that have failed them. No Child Left Behind is a great aspiration, but the program hasn't lived up to the promise. In fact, it's left far too many students and schools and teachers behind. We must reform and fund No Child Left Behind to ensure that it is more than a slogan.

As President, I'd launch a campaign to recruit and support hundreds of thousands of new teachers across the country, because the single most important factor inside the school building for a student's achievement is the person standing in front of the classroom. I will treat teachers like the professionals they are, making sure they get the pay they deserve, while working with them to develop the high standards we need. We need to create real career opportunities that reward successful teachers, motivate them to stay in the profession, and take advantage of their skills to help mentor new teachers. Teachers and educators need time to plan lessons and learn. That time should be made available each week and in the summer time. And teachers and principals should be paid for this additional work.

We can't ignore that the achievement gap is a problem across the country. To tackle this problem, the first thing we have to do is close the gap that exists between children before they enter kindergarten by providing high-quality preschool opportunities to all children. Far too few Latino and African-American children are enrolled in early childhood education programs, despite the proven successes of such programs. As president, I will increase funding for Head Start and expand access to Pre-K.

Another step toward closing this gap is to attract talented teachers to high-needs areas. We know that low-income and minority students are disproportionately taught by teachers who have less experience than teachers in other schools. My plan to attract and retain high-quality teachers in high-needs districts will go a long way toward closing this gap. I introduced the Teaching Residency Act, which recently became part of the Higher Education Amendments approved by the Senate HELP committee. This program will



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provide grant funding for prospective teachers to serve residencies with school districts similar to training in other professional fields like medicine. Prospective teachers will learn from mentor teachers, with stipends provided to teachers-in-training in exchange for a commitment to teach in that district once they complete the program. This will provide effective training of new teachers in high-needs districts.

But government alone cannot solve all the problems facing our public education system. We need greater parental involvement with their child's education. We need parents to turn off the TV and the video games, talk to their child's teachers, check their homework, and make sure they get the help they need.

Our work cannot end at improving public K-12 education; we also must finally make college affordable for every American who wants to go. We can start by increasing federal college grants to ensure that the cost of college does not prevent anyone who wants to from attending college. I have a proven record of leadership for increasing the maximum Pell Grant and offering the grant to students who need it. The first bill I introduced in the U.S. Senate would help make college more affordable for many Americans by increasing the maximum Pell Grant from \$4,050 to \$5,100. In February, 2007, President Bush signed into law legislation to increase federal Pell grants to \$4,310. I have worked in a bipartisan way on the Senate HELP Committee to propose an increase in the Pell Grant to \$5,400 over the next few years.

Second, we should free up money for student aid by reforming the federal student loan program. Currently, there are two basic federal loan programs. The Direct Loan system allows students to borrow from the government through their schools. The Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFEL) instead gives private banks federal subsidies to make government-backed student loans. FFEL guaranteed loans cost about \$6 more per \$100 loan than direct loans. As president, I will eliminate wasteful subsidies for banks under FFEL and mandate that all federal student loans be provided through the direct loan program. By switching to the direct lending system, we can save taxpayers billions of dollars a year – money that can and should be directed to making college more affordable for Americans. Savings from the elimination of the guaranteed loan program will be redirected to fund need-based grants, such as Pell Grants. Based on FFEL loans for fiscal year 2008, nearly \$6 billion would be saved if those same loan amounts were disbursed through the direct loan program.

**ISSUE AREA: CIVIL RIGHTS.** Despite significant progress, discrimination is still a reality for too many Americans. For every dollar white men earn, women earn approximately 77 cents, Latinas earn 56 cents, and African-American men earn 75 cents. Women are more likely to suffer violence; a woman is raped every 6 minutes and battered every 9 seconds. At the federal level and in most states gays and lesbians lack even basic civil rights protections. Affirmative action is being eliminated from the public sector, with colleges becoming

**increasingly homogeneous and opportunity blocked for many black and Latino students.**

**As President, what will you do to end discrimination and promote equality for all, regardless of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation?**

To start, there should be no doubt that fighting discrimination and promoting equality and inclusion will be a firm commitment of my Administration. I will select an Attorney General who understands his or her duty to uphold the Constitution. For me, these issues are not simply the causes of a campaign; they have been the causes of my life. After law school, I worked as a civil rights lawyer – on cases ranging from voting rights to housing and employment discrimination – and constitutional law professor. As a State Senator, I passed legislation on racial profiling and laws extending the protection of hate crime laws to lesbian and gay citizens. As a U.S. Senator, I have been a champion of voting rights for minorities and ensuring equal pay for women. As president, I will continue to stand up for civil rights. I know that regardless of how far we've come, there is still more work to do.

On the issue of pay equity, we know that despite decades of progress, women still make only 77 cents on every dollar a man earns. African American women with a four-year college degree make only 65 cents for every dollar made by a white male with the same educational attainment. I believe the government needs to take steps to better enforce the Equal Pay Act, fight job discrimination, and improve child care options and family medical leave to give women equal footing in the workplace. And I believe that we must address the historic pattern of undervaluing and underpaying so-called “women’s jobs,” which is why I am a co-sponsor of the Fair Pay Act of 2007. The Fair Pay Act expands upon the protections of the Equal Pay Act by requiring employers to provide equal pay for not only “equal work,” but also for jobs that are comparable in skill, effort, responsibility and working conditions. The bill would also prohibit pay discrimination on the basis of race and national origin, as well as gender. Finally, I have co-sponsored and introduced legislation with Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and others to reverse the Supreme Court’s decision in *Ledbetter v. Goodyear Tires*, which made it difficult for minority and women employees to allege employment discriminations.

We also know there’s more to do to protect gay and lesbian Americans from employment and other types of discrimination. I have been a long-time advocate for LGBT rights. I believe the Employment Non-Discrimination Act should be expanded to include sexual orientation and gender identity. I co-sponsored legislation in the Illinois State Senate that would ban discrimination in employment and housing on the basis of sexual orientation. I am a co-sponsor of the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act, which would expand federal jurisdiction to reach violent hate crimes perpetrated because of the race, color, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender identity or physical disability of the victim. And I believe that we should repeal the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, which has prevented from serving brave men and women who are able and willing to serve.

Finally, I support affirmative action. As a lawyer who’s worked on civil rights cases, I can say that when there is strong evidence of prolonged and systemic discrimination by organizations, affirmative action may be the only meaningful remedy available. Affirmative action programs, when properly structured, can open up opportunities otherwise closed to qualified minorities without having an adverse impact on the opportunities for whites. And while I support affirmative action for minorities, I also support efforts to increase opportunities for qualified students from low-income college to attend colleges and universities – regardless of their race.

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The following three issues were a top priority for a significant number of participants. We would appreciate hearing your views on these questions as well.

**ISSUE AREA: WAGES. Millions of working families struggle to make ends meet because their jobs fail to pay a living wage. Wages have fallen by 3.2% in real terms since October of 2001, while inflation and costs of living continue to rise. With the federal minimum wage stuck at \$5.15/hour for almost 10 years, 31 states have recognized the inadequacy of \$11,000/year and raised the minimum wage on the state level. Still, there are an estimated 7.4 million Americans who are classified as working poor.**

**As President, what will you do to lift hard-working American families out of poverty?**

I strongly support increasing the minimum wage and indexing it to inflation. Although the recent increase in the federal minimum wage is an improvement – and the first raise for America’s lowest paid workers in a decade – I believe we need to do more to make the minimum wage a living wage that helps American families not just survive, but succeed. Additionally, I would expand the Earned Income Tax Credit to make sure that full-time workers can earn a living wage that allows them to raise their families and pay for basic needs such as food, transportation, and housing. I have a strong record of achievement on this issue. I wrote and passed the Illinois Earned Income Tax Credit for the working poor, one of the most effective tools devised to move people out of poverty.

To further lift American families out of poverty, I have proposed a comprehensive plan to address urban poverty. First, it will create a White House Office of Urban Policy to develop a strategy for metropolitan America and to ensure that all federal dollars targeted to urban areas are effectively spent on the highest-impact programs. The Director of Urban Policy will report directly to the President and coordinate all federal urban programs.

Second, I will create 20 Promise Neighborhoods in areas that have high levels of poverty, crime and low levels of student academic achievement in cities across the nation. The Promise Neighborhoods will model the Harlem Children’s Zone and seek to engage all resident children and their parents into an achievement program based on tangible goals, including college for each and every participating student, strong physical and mental health outcomes for children as well as retention of meaningful employment and parenting schools for parents. Promise Neighborhood sites will be selected by the federal government after review of applications from cities and their existing non-profit organizations and school districts. Cities, or private entities, will be required to pay 50% of the program costs.

Finally, I will invest \$1 billion over five years to create transitional jobs and career pathway programs that have proven success in helping low-income Americans succeed in the workplace.

**ISSUE AREA: SENIORS. Seniors in America remain increasingly vulnerable. Half of today’s workers do not have any retirement plan on the job and more employers have**

**stopped offering guaranteed pension benefits. Americans' savings rate is now less than zero; only about half of families have any retirement savings. Seniors who want to remain independent are forced into nursing homes, instead of receiving personal care at home or in assisted living facilities. Health care costs continue to claim a greater share of seniors' fixed income.**

**As President, what will you do to ensure that our seniors have financial and medical security?**

The first thing we have to do to protect our seniors' financial and medical security is to preserve Social Security and Medicare. The long-term problems with these programs are real but manageable. Social Security is one of the most important government programs ever created. With a little genuine bipartisan leadership, we could make the necessary adjustments without gutting the system with privatization, as the current president has proposed.

The real challenge of Medicare is the rising cost of health care. By reducing health care costs through universal health care reform, we can solve much of the solvency issues around Medicare. We must also identify and eliminate administrative waste, such as the flawed ban on government negotiation to lower the price of prescription drugs offered through the Medicare Part D program.

Spending in the U.S. for prescription drugs was \$200 billion in 2005, more than five times greater than the \$40.3 billion spent in 1990. The U.S. is the largest market for pharmaceuticals in the world, yet our seniors pay the highest prices for brand-name drugs. To help lower the cost of prescription drugs, I believe that the federal government should negotiate for lower drug prices for seniors in the Medicare program, just as it does to obtain lower prices for our veterans and troops. In addition, the federal government must crack down on industry practices that prevent generic drugs from coming to the market and that unfairly target provider prescribing habits. I also support efforts to allow seniors to purchase prescription drugs in Canada and bring them back to the U.S. All of these steps will be needed to close the "doughnut hole" in the Medicare Part D Prescription Drug Program, which limits benefits for seniors with more than \$2,400 but less than \$5,451 in annual drug costs. Approximately 4 million seniors hit the doughnut hole in 2006, paying full price for drugs while also paying drug plan premiums. I am also concerned about the difficulty encountered by seniors when enrolling and choosing among a large number of plans; the restrictions on changing plan selection after enrollment; and the high costs of the program for seniors.

The focus of reform options should be on protecting the basic integrity and fairness of the Social Security and Medicare programs, which provide a vital safety net to millions of seniors and Americans with disabilities. Social Security and Medicare are more than just retirement and health care plans; they are also critical programs of social insurance. The critical element in strengthening Social Security and Medicare is leadership that puts aside ideology in favor of solutions – that is, leadership that can bring together different interests toward a shared purpose. I will provide that leadership.



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Finally, we must strengthen retirement security in this country for future and current retirees as well. To secure defined benefit pensions, I would insist that companies keep the promises they made to their employees. In the Senate, I worked closely with Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) and the Association of Flight Attendants to help protect flight attendants' pension plans during the United Airlines bankruptcy crisis. I support amending the bankruptcy law to keep companies from filing for Chapter 11 in order to shortchange workers. I supported new rules to force companies to properly fund their pension plans so taxpayers don't end up footing the bill. I also voted to shore up the funding of the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, the federal agency that guarantees retirees receive at least some of their pension monies if their companies go out of business.

Even with these efforts to preserve the defined benefit pension system, the personal saving rate is at its lowest level since the Great Depression. Only 55 percent of Americans working full-time hold a job with any retirement savings plan. The percentage is even lower for part-time workers and minorities. I want to make retirement saving easier, cheaper, and more automatic for working people who get only minor tax benefits to save and who do not have the option of a defined benefit plan. In the Senate, I supported the Save More for Retirement Act with Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM). The bill provides incentives for automatic enrollment in 401Ks. I would also expand savings by establishing automatic enrollment in IRAs for employees who are not covered by 401K plans and expanding and improving the Saver's Tax Credit to help more low and moderate income households save.

**ISSUE AREA: IMMIGRATION.** America is a nation of immigrants. Yet today's immigrants face an atmosphere of hostility, violence, and a badly broken system of laws. Employers depend on immigrant labor, but recent policies have emphasized only enforcement, leading to worker exploitation. From 1986 to 1998, the border patrol budget increased sixfold and the number of agents on the southern border doubled to 8,500. Despite these efforts, millions of undocumented immigrants arrived to work in our fields, hospitals, and restaurants. Only 5,000 visas per year are granted for unskilled workers.

**As President, what is your plan for fixing our broken immigration system?**

I believe the immigration issue has been exploited by politicians to divide the nation rather than find real solutions. We must rise above divisive politics and act in the interests of our national and economic security. I have played a leading role in crafting comprehensive immigration reform and believe that our broken immigration system can only be fixed by putting politics aside and offering a solution that strengthens our security while reaffirming our heritage as a nation of immigrants.

I support a comprehensive immigration plan that includes a more humane, consistent, legal immigration process, and tougher border enforcement. I will preserve the integrity of our borders to reduce illegal immigration. I will also remove incentives to enter the country illegally and crack down on employers who hire illegal immigrants. I have championed a proposal with Senators Charles Grassley (R-IA), Ted Kennedy (D-MA), and Max Baucus (D-MT) to create a new employment eligibility verification system so employers could verify that their employees are legally eligible to work in the U.S., making the system fair to legal workers and tougher on employers.

To improve legal immigration, I believe immigrant workers should have legal protections to avoid abuse and downward pressure on American wages and working conditions. I introduced the Citizenship Promotion Act of 2007 to ensure that immigration application fees are both reasonable and fair. This bill reverses large fee increases for legal immigrants seeking to become citizens and provides grants to states to help educate and promote citizenship.

Lastly, I will bring people out of the shadows. For the millions living here illegally but otherwise playing by the rules, we must encourage them to come out of hiding and get right with the law. I support a system that requires undocumented immigrants who are in good standing to pay a fine, learn English, not commit crimes, and go to the back of the line for citizenship. After all those conditions are met, they would be granted the opportunity to stay in the United States.

I will only support a guestworker program if it breaks the mold from the guestworker programs of the past. These workers should not be hired because employers want to hire them; they should only be hired if there is really no American willing to do the job at a fair wage. I would force employers to offer the job to Americans first at a fair wage. I would make sure that guestworkers could join unions so that they would not be pitted against American workers and drive down working conditions. And I would cap the program at no more than 200,000.