

JOHNSON'S LEGACY TODAY: DO WE LIVE IN A GREAT SOCIETY?

Seattle Repertory Theatre's productions of Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" and "The Great Society" shed light on Lyndon B. Johnson's tumultuous U.S. presidency. In this 10-week series, we'll explore the legacy of Johnson's noteworthy legislative acts and how decisions made 50 years ago continue to resonate in modern America. Today's topic: The Great Society's health care agenda.

JOHNSON'S HEALTH CARE PROGRAMS

Johnson initially proclaimed that the Great Society would address the needs of cities, rural areas, and classrooms. Using the full potential of his political power, Johnson wanted a health care program that would meet the needs of all people, particularly groups which had been overlooked.

From 1945 to 1965, the number of senior citizens in the United States had almost doubled, becoming close to 10 percent of the population. Health care costs were rising at a rate of several times the overall cost of living. Thus, Johnson aimed his health care programs at those who could not afford medical attention, particularly older Americans and the disabled.

Medicare

The basic goals in Johnson's health care legislation of 1965 were similar to those of President Harry S. Truman's failed national health care proposal in 1945. Twenty years later, the nation was ready to accept the notion of national health care in the form of Medicare. Medicare was directed to those 65 and older. Before its institution, only half of Americans over age 65 had health insurance. In simple terms, the program operated by a tax system in which employees' earnings were matched by employer contributions.

As a tribute to Truman, Johnson signed Medicare and Medicaid into law in Truman's home state of Missouri and presented Truman and his wife with the first Medicare cards. At the July 30, 1965 signing of Medicare Johnson remarked:

"During your working years, the people of America—you—will contribute through the social security program a small amount each payday for hospital insurance protection. For example, the average worker in 1966 will contribute about \$1.50 per month. The employer will contribute a similar amount. And this will provide the funds to pay up to 90 days of hospital care for each illness, plus diagnostic care, and up to 100 home health visits after you are 65. And beginning in 1967, you will also be covered for up to 100 days of care in a skilled nursing home after a period of hospital care.

And under a separate plan, when you are 65—that the Congress originated itself, in its own good judgment—you may be covered for medical and surgical fees whether you are in or out of the hospital. You will pay \$3 per month after you are 65 and your Government will contribute an equal amount."

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Medicaid

Medicaid is the "separate plan" referenced for families with low income and limited resources. Medicaid is funded by the federal government and the states, though the eligibility is managed by the state. Thus, someone may qualify for Medicaid in one state but not in another.

Although both Medicare and Medicaid sought to meet the needs of America's most vulnerable people, due to the core principle of federally funded health care, both programs were not entirely well received. Some doctors called them "socialized medicine" and some insurance companies thought they would take away business.

Affordable Care Act

In 2014, President Barack Obama expanded eligibility and federal funding of Medicaid with the Patient and Affordable Care Act. Some of the more popular aspects of the current act include allowing children on parents' insurance until age 26 and that individuals cannot be turned down for pre-existing conditions, etc. Often dubbed Obamacare by friends and foes, the Affordable Care Act has received the same type of resistance Johnson faced - even as it is supported by many others.



- How is today's Affordable Care Act similar to Medicare and Medicaid?
- Is mandatory health care insurance a good idea?
- What other countries' health care programs is the Affordable Care Act similar to?
- Why do you think this act was did not become law until 2010?