Keep talking about aging with presidential candidates

John and Tom Huit - Columnist

Emerging as one of the biggest challenges — if not the biggest — facing our nation is the issue of aging. By 2050, the number of seniors in America will increase from 40 million to 70 million. This dramatic demographic shift will impact everything — from the economy, health care and long-term care services, public and private pensions, housing, transportation, social services and so much more.

It may be one of the biggest challenges — if not the biggest — facing this nation. We hardly any of us, who are less than 10 years or so from the age of retirement, will have a major impact on the issue of aging. The news is not good.

The good news is that they have a chance to do just that. First, thanks to the recent AARP/Des Moines Register presidential candidates forum held around the state. Seventeen candidates participated, each hearing approximately 20 minutes to answer questions from the audience and media. Rep. Tim Ryan from Ohio and Sen. Kamala Harris from California made the most of their time.

The forum gave a much-needed focus to a host of important aging issues, but many to address in the coming years. The conversations were short — but they were great; they allowed for a quick and incisive analysis of the candidates’ knowledge of the issues and their views and ideas.

Here are some of the forum’s prominent themes.

Preserve Social Security for future generations by shifting the ceiling on the amount of earnings subject to the payroll tax (as Mr. Trump has proposed) or raising the cap on earnings up to $120,000, raising the tax on those at higher levels and funding the system by increasing the amount of revenue coming in.

Improve Medicare by expanding coverage for hearing, vision and dental services; expanding coverage for home care, assisted living services and other services that allow people to live in their own homes longer; and increasing government payments in order for hospitals to remain stable.

Change how money is spent on health care by investing more in keeping people healthier longer rather than keeping them when they are sick. An example: spending more on research into how to prevent or delay disease (cancer, Alzheimer’s, etc.) which will mean improved quality of the AARP Senior Health budget.

Reduce costs of prescription drugs by allowing the government to negotiate prices with the drug industry, making capital to import drugs from other nations, and lowering patent laws to ensure that generic drugs get on the market quicker.

Address long-term care workforce shortages with policies that improve pay and benefits. Increase training and provide more opportunity for career growth. Candidates recognized the importance of having long-term care quality at home care agencies, certified nurse aides and other workers who care for or support aging Americans. Many candidates called for the issue to be “a priority, important and a desperately needed.” They believe we need a comprehensive, good plan that recognizes the need for more training.

Be more to support family caregivers. This was close to home for many candidates who have been in those experiences. They appreciate the challenges of those who care for adults and children, and those who work in emotional terms about how it brings a pain in the heart. They know how many caregivers are unpaid, and the extra cost of their service to the nation.

There was significant disagreement on one big topic: how to ensure affordable health care.

Several candidates support a “Medicare for All” plan that would cover all a second-year period, but few voiced any desire to expand Medicaid.

Numerous other candidates support a variation of it, often referred to as public option. It would give every American the choice of keeping the insurance they have or switching to a Medicare plan that is available on a public option to it.

We applaud the sponsors for hosting these sessions and the candidates for participating.

If you haven’t already, we urge you to watch the recording posted with this story on DesMoinesRegister.com at (URL). It’s a unique opportunity to compare and contrast how each candidate approaches these critical issues.

The AARP/Des Moines Register events should be viewed as the start of a conversation that needs to continue at every campaign event across the country. The media should help get the message if they have already been working on issues related to these critical issues.

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