

Kerry Seizes on News of Poverty and Health Care-Washington Post 26 Aug

By Jim VandeHei

ANOKA, Minn., Aug. 26 -- Sen. John F. Kerry on Thursday blamed President Bush for the steady rise in the number of uninsured and poor, saying the White House has made life harder for millions of Americans by failing to curb the everyday costs of driving a car, going to school and visiting a doctor.

"Your wages are going down, your jobs are going overseas, your health care is disappearing, your kids are having a harder time getting the kind of education they want, your college-education door is getting slammed in the faces of some kids," Kerry told a few hundred voters assembled here at Anoka Technical College. He came here armed with new census data showing that the number of Americans without health insurance grew by 1.4 million while 1.3 million fell into poverty over the past year.

This was a key part of the Democratic ticket's message Thursday, as vice presidential nominee John Edwards told several hundred at an outdoor event in Las Cruces, N.M.: "Some people are working two jobs, but they're working for minimum wage and still living in poverty. . . . When John Kerry is president, we will raise the minimum wage and bring jobs to communities where they are so badly needed."

Edwards, who followed Bush to this city about an hour north of the border, said "I can't believe the American people will reelect a man that cost 1.4 million people their health care."

In Anoka to court undecided voters, Kerry also defended himself from allegations that he lied about his war record and that he waffles on the solutions to the very problems he discussed here. "America deserves a discussion like we are having here today," the Democratic presidential nominee said, and he challenged Bush to weekly debates. The Bush campaign declined the offer.

During a question-and-answer session, a local man pressed Kerry to explain whether he is a flip-flopper, as the Bush campaign is contending. The Democratic nominee cited two examples to explain why he considers the charge bunk: trade and education.

Kerry said he has been accused of reversing his support for the North American Free Trade Agreement. "I did vote for NAFTA," he said, but he said he now criticizes it because the pact's labor standards are not being enforced.

Kerry said he has also been accused of backpedaling on the No Child Left Behind education law, which sets new performance standards and punishments for schools failing to reach them. Kerry voted for the law but frequently criticizes Bush for failing to fully fund it and not giving schools more leeway in attaining the new standards. "I think we have to fix it," Kerry said.

Kerry sought to appeal to swing voters by emphasizing his values and commitment to fiscal discipline. "I am a Christian, but that should not be what decides whether or not somebody votes for me," Kerry said. "I

as president will uphold the Constitution of the United States, which the Founding Fathers smartly, brilliantly made clear separates the affairs of church in speech."

Still, it was domestic issues, health care in particular, that dominated the day. Kerry said his first act as president will be to press for a massive expansion of federal health care programs financed by a repeal of tax cuts for those making more than \$200,000 a year. "This administration has had four years to put a plan in place," he said. "Four years, no plan."

Kerry's has proposed a more ambitious health program than Bush. The Democrat would expand several existing programs, offer new tax credits and reimburse businesses for major costs from catastrophic cases. The plan carries a price tag of between \$650 billion and nearly \$1 trillion, experts say. Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.), speaking on behalf of Bush, said the plan would "not lower cost of health care" but "will simply transfer the cost to taxpayers."

While largely avoiding the debate over his war record and television ads criticizing his antiwar protesting after the Vietnam war, Kerry told the crowd: "You are now learning about the lie and how the lie was put out there. I am telling you the God's honest truth about what happened over there."

As Kerry spoke, the anti-Kerry Swift Boat Veterans for Truth released an Internet ad accusing him of lying about crossing into Cambodia on Christmas Eve of 1968, an event that Kerry initially said was "seared" into his memory but that he has since suggested through a spokesman might not be accurate.

Edwards, as he has at every stop this week, also called the ads lies and reminded the crowd of Kerry's military service record. "When a man loves his country enough to put his life on the line and put the lives of his men before his own, that's someone who represents real American values," Edwards said.

Staff writer David Nakamura, traveling with Edwards, contributed to this report.