

As the Affordable Care Act (ACA) takes effect this month, it might be helpful for people to know how its prototype in Massachusetts is working, after nearly seven years.

Virtually every resident in the Commonwealth is insured. More private companies offer insurance to their employees than ever before. Over 90 percent of our residents have a primary care physician. Primary care is less likely to be delivered in expensive emergency rooms. Preventive care is up. Health disparities are down among women, minorities and low-income people. Most importantly, on many measures, we are healthier.

Those are the facts. The stories are better. I met a young woman named Jaclyn, a cancer survivor who got life-saving care through our version of an exchange. She had no way to afford care before health care reform – it saved her life.

A self-employed man named Ken ignored his gastrointestinal symptoms for years because he couldn't afford to

see a doctor or pay for possible treatments. Once insured, he was seen and treated for Stage III colon cancer and is cancer free today.

Over all these years, expanding health insurance to everyone has added only about 1 percent of state spending to our budget. Those budgets have remained responsible, balanced and on-time.

Expansion hasn't hurt our general economy. Unemployment has remained lower than the national average and economic growth has been higher. At one business incubator, a young entrepreneur told me he moved his start-up to Massachusetts because he wanted to be sure his young family had health insurance while his business got off the ground. Today that young man's company is employing others.

The nation's great health care challenge, with or without

universal coverage, is controlling health care costs. Though health insurance premiums had been rising faster than inflation for many years before our reforms went into effect, we are now getting control of them. Average base rates increased more than 16 percent three years ago. They average less than 2 percent today. Some of that progress is the result of tools made available by the ACA. Indeed, early results show that for some individuals and small businesses, premiums may drop as much as 20% percent because of Obamacare.

In other words, health care reform works in Massachusetts. And it will work in America. We need it to. In one form or another, health care significantly affects business, household and government budgets, people's ability to get a job, and a child's readiness to learn. Accessible, affordable, quality care in all cases improves lives and in many cases saves lives. It gives

peace of mind and economic security to families. It increases productivity for large and small employers as well as for students. It creates jobs and contributes to our economic strength. It's a powerful statement of who we are.

As the ACA is implemented this month, the entire country will begin to enjoy the benefits that we have seen from health care reform here in Massachusetts, and much more. Small businesses benefit from the ACA through new tax credits that make health insurance more affordable. With more carriers and plans to choose from, there is a more competitive rate-setting environment. People with pre-existing conditions can no longer be denied insurance. People who get really sick can no longer be kicked off their insurance. And kids can stay on their parents' plans a bit longer, until they can get their own.

Tea Party Republicans don't want the Affordable Care Act. Do they really mean they don't want these kinds of improvements

in the lives of millions of Americans? I don't think so. Would they rather we address these issues with a government program instead of through the market-based, individual choices that are the framework of the ACA? I don't think that's true either. Have they proposed an alternative way to accomplish these goals? Nope. Despite a presidential election, a decision by the United States Supreme Court, and over 40 failed repeal attempts, it's clear that what Tea Party Republicans don't like about Obamacare is the "Obama" part of it.

In Massachusetts we're proud to be home to many "firsts." The first Thanksgiving. The first battles of the American Revolution. The first public library, the first typewriter and the first subway. Even the first chocolate chip cookie. Recently, the first state to achieve universal health care, the model for the ACA.

Firsts are hard. There are and will be challenges. But it has been and will be worth it. Just ask Jaclyn or Ken or any of

your neighbors.

*Deval L. Patrick is the Governor of Massachusetts.*