

Lt. Gov. Hopeful Garamendi Promises Health Care Reforms in California

News Report, Viji Sundaram,
[India West](#), Aug 19, 2005

FREMONT, Calif. - State Insurance Commissioner John Garamendi told a gathering of Indian Americans here that he will take their advice on matters relating to their community should he become lieutenant governor.

For this, he said, he will set up an Indian American Advisory Committee, with people "drawn from a broad spectrum" of the community serving on it.

"That title of lieutenant governor has the best sound system in the state," the veteran politician told those who attended a dinner reception hosted for him by community activist Jeevan Zutshi, and his wife, Usha, in their hillside home.

"What I want to do, I can't do alone. In order to inform, and help determine what is the best course to take" on issues affecting the state's residents, "I will need your help."

Garamendi went on to say that he wants "to use the office of lieutenant governor like it has never been done before to drive public policy" in such areas as education, consumer protection, business, research and the environment.

But it was on health care that the commissioner dwelt on the most, an issue, he asserted, that was "crucial to California," and in which he has invested a great deal of time.

Calling it one of the ills of society, he warned that if something were not done soon to remedy health care policy, it would collapse. Already, southern California has seen "a meltdown of the health care system."

Garamendi said insurance companies are "pricing out" Californians, leaving some 6.6 million of them with no health insurance. And what insurers offer is only "skeletal policies" that come with limited coverage and high deductibles.

About 10 percent of Indian Americans live below the federal poverty line statewide, according to a study out last March, which was based largely on the 2000 U.S. census data. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis fared even worse.

Those who are able to pay premiums are not getting their money's worth, said Garamendi, who regulates insurers operating in California. A whopping 30 percent of the money collected goes towards administrative costs, the rest towards treatment.

As lieutenant governor, he said, he will ensure that every state resident has basic health coverage, either via the government or through the private sector.

Garamendi is one of eight candidates and five Democrats who are eyeing the lieutenant governor's spot in the 2006 election. He enjoys the backing of a large segment of the Indian American community, as does his Democratic rival, state Sen. Liz Figueroa.

In a private interview with India-West later that evening, Garamendi acknowledged that the sky-rocketing fees at the University of California and California State University systems were putting higher education out of reach of many middle-income students.

"There couldn't be a more damaging policy, a crazed policy," said Garamendi who, as lieutenant governor, will automatically chair the two school systems' Board of Regents. "It's denying middle- and upper-middle income students a chance to get on the economic ladder. To choose to tax tomorrow's producers shows that we have lost our minds."

As lieutenant governor, he will also chair the state's Commission for Economic Development. Asked if he would try

to use that role to further strengthen business ties between India and California, Garamendi responded in the affirmative.

"These (immigrants in California) are the people who are and will be the Yankee traders," who will help California's economy," Garamendi said, referring to the U.S. traders of yore who kept a lookout for new goods and new markets and parlayed their shrewd business sense into profits. "Part of the role of the lieutenant governor is that you are involved in the international arena."

Garamendi, who earned his master's degree in business administration from Harvard Business School, after earning a bachelor's degree in economics from U.C. Berkeley, began public service in the international arena almost 30 years ago, when he and his wife, Patti, went to Ethiopia as U.S. Peace Corps volunteers.

Patti later became associate director of the U.S. Peace Corps.

The couple also went to India in the 1970s, and spent some time in Punjab.

During the Clinton administration, the 60-year-old Garamendi served as deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, where he quickly became the department's troubleshooter.

President Clinton appointed him to be the special U.S. negotiator to resolve some long-standing issues of the Island of Guam, a U.S. territory.

On the environmental front, Garamendi was the government's lead negotiator in its efforts to save Headwater's, a 7,500-acre ancient redwood forest in California.

In the 14 years he served as a state senator and two years in the Assembly, Garamendi chaired the joint committee on science and technology, the senate Health and Welfare Committee and the Senate Revenue and Taxation Committee.