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State panel begins research on universal health care

By Cara Matthews
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GLENS FALLS — As physicians and other advocates for universal health care made their case Wednesday for 100 percent coverage in New York, insurers said any solution should build on the “strengths and flexibility” of the current system rather than entail a radical overhaul.

The CEO of Excellus BlueCross BlueShield, which covers about 2 million Upstate New Yorkers, told a panel looking at universal health care that the state should focus on removing barriers to and creating incentives for more private health care coverage “because government should not and really cannot take on the entire burden.”

“Historically, the concept of health insurance was an invention of the private sector with collaboration among the providers of care, employers and government. Pluralistic financing benefits the health care delivery system by protecting it from the ebbs and flows of the election cycle and competing demands for government spending,” said David Klein, CEO, adding that government should seek ways of encouraging employers to voluntarily provide insurance.

Gov. Eliot Spitzer set up the panel, which includes the state commissioners of health and insurance and other experts. Wednesday was the first of the panel's six public hearings. The board has until May 31 to make recommendations to the governor.

The New York Universal Health Care Options Campaign, comprising groups like the American Cancer Society, the Hunger Action Network and the League of Women Voters, held a rally for universal health care before the all-day hearing. That doesn't mean socialized medicine, said Bernie Fetterly of the Tompkins County Health Care Task Force. But there would be a socialized payment system for medical care, similar to the federal Medicare program for the elderly, he said.

Rebecca Elgie of the Tompkins County Workers' Center and Fetterly, both of Ithaca, said they have found widespread support for single-payer health coverage. They have visited nearly 30 counties to talk about the issue and eight counties have passed resolutions in support so far, including Tompkins, Ulster and Cortland.

Elgie presented to the panel petitions with more than 2,200 signatures of people who want a single-payer system.

Public-opinion polls consistently show strong public support for universal health care, but the issues are how it is set up and paid for and who controls it. Opinions differ on whether it should be a single-payer system like Medicare or some combination of expanding public programs, modifying regulations in the private market, helping small businesses and making other changes.

Absent actions on the federal level, states have been dealing with the issue on their own. Massachusetts, for example, passed a law last year requiring anyone who can afford insurance to buy it. Businesses that don't provide insurance have to help pay for it.

Recent census data show that 2.7 million, or 14 percent, of all New Yorkers don't have health insurance, even though the state spends more per person on health care than any other state, said Elisabeth Ryden Benjamin of the Community Service Society of New York. The society found through a survey this summer that only 37 percent of full-time working-poor people received health insurance through their jobs. Many workers said they couldn't afford the premiums.

Several speakers said health insurance should not be treated as a vehicle for insurers to make profits.

The American Cancer Society recently announced it would spend its \$15 million ad budget this year on the problems of inadequate health coverage. New York must enact universal health care to end suffering and death from cancer, said David Momrow of the society.

Benetta "Bunnie" Sarro of Saratoga Springs, a volunteer for the society, said her husband, Patrick, died of lung cancer last fall. The couple could not afford a cancer therapy prescribed for Pat Sarro because the cost per prescription was \$710. Medicare didn't cover it, she said.

"I don't know if Pat's meds would have bought him more time. But I do think we should have been given the chance to find out," she said.

Job-based coverage is working for more than 10 million New Yorkers and should be expanded, and the state should find the right balance between public and private insurance, said Mark Amodeo of the state Business Council. Only about 50 percent of small businesses in New York offer coverage to workers because it is so expensive. The panel should give that issue special attention, he said.

"The current health care system has a significant part in the uncompetitive cost burden facing New York's employers, and something must be done," he said.

The New York Health Plan Association, represented by Paul Macielak, believes all eligible uninsured residents should be placed in existing public programs and commercial insurance should be expanded through statutory and regulatory actions that make health insurance more affordable without subsidy. Consumers should be able to pick from a variety of affordable policies, and the insurance industry should have the flexibility to design and market such products, he said.

New York can reform health care by building on the “strengths and flexibility” of the current health-care system, Macielak said.

Hearings

Schedule of remaining public hearings, all of which run from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and will be Webcast. Visit www.partnership4coverage.ny.gov for more information:

- * Oct 3, Erie County Community College, Buffalo.
- * Oct. 30, Fordham University, New York City.
- * Nov. 13, Onondaga Community College, Syracuse.
- * Nov. 26, Monroe Community College, Rochester.
- * Dec. 5, State University of New York at Old Westbury, Nassau County.