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Spitzer's approach for health care plan lauded

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Following the political debacle surrounding Gov. Eliot Spitzer's proposal to make driver's licenses more readily available to undocumented immigrants, Long Island advocates are praising the governor for his handling so far of another potentially incendiary topic: universal health care.

The Partnership for Coverage, the governor's initiative to promote universal health coverage for New Yorkers, is scheduled today to hold the last of eight hearings around the state.

Advocates, labor and health leaders and businessmen have been invited to SUNY Old Westbury to give their views on whether and how best to provide all New Yorkers with health insurance.

Donna Kass of the Long Island Health Access Monitoring Project, which advocates for the uninsured, pointed to other Spitzer missteps, but said, "politically Spitzer is playing this one right. He said he wants to take a building-block approach and I think politically that is the way to go. Otherwise he could have a rebellion on his hands."

Spitzer announced yesterday that the state had hired the Urban Institute, a national policy research organization, as the consultant to prepare a report on various universal health care options. Health department spokeswoman Claudia Hutton said it must be on the governor's desk by May 31.

Some proposals are already in the offing. The Community Service Society, a Manhattan-based advocacy group for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers, is to present its plan at today's hearing. Building on and expanding the state's Child Health Plus insurance, its plan is a "steppingstone" to universal coverage that would benefit working- and middle-class families, said the plan's lead author, Elisabeth Benjamin.

Assemb. Richard Gottfried (D-Manhattan), the head of the State Assembly's health committee, also is to hold a news conference today in Manhattan to release details of his plan.

Gwen O'Shea, head of the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island, said it is critical for all affected groups to be included in discussions, which so far seems to be happening.

Kevin Dahill, head of the Nassau-Suffolk Hospital Council, said it appears Spitzer may be taking a page from Massachusetts, which in 2006 adopted a universal health care plan. There, he said, "all the vested interests were put in a room," and all ended up "giving a little." Dahill said he would like to see the same approach in New York.

"It's too important a topic to get caught up in partisan politics," he said.