

Rising health care costs tough on small business

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SALT LAKE CITY -- The debate over reforming the nation's health care system has come to Utah.

Citizens, lawmakers, industry representatives, lobbyists and advocates packed a committee room on Utah's Capitol Hill. The discussion pitted the need for change versus the fear of it.

Health and Human Services Interim Committee Chair Chris Buttars brought out a stack of papers 1,600 pages deep. It was the House reform bill from Congress.

Buttars believes it gives too much power to the government, but others say some change is needed.

Since 1986, Diane Knight has run her own business, a daycare center in Utah County. Nine years ago, both she and her husband were diagnosed with cancer.

Scrambling to find coverage, the two became experts in the mind-numbing laws of COBRA and pre-existing conditions. Knight calls the fear and distress of health insurance worse than the fear of cancer.

"The cold, hard truth is I had to turn my life upside down in order to gain health insurance. Health insurance runs my life," Knight said.

Utah's Health Policy Project executive director, Judi Hilman, made the case that health care reform was coming whether most Utahns wanted it or not.

"What I'm saying is this train is leaving the station. We'd better get on it to make the reforms better around the issues we know will matter the most over the long term," said Hilman.

Hilman says she was trying to dispel what she said were myths. She says these reforms are not going to get government in between you and your doctor.

Meanwhile, small businesses, which employ 60 percent of the state's workers, are under intense strain from rising health costs.

"It will create a situation where they will either drop the coverage for their employees or they will get out of the business they are in. They have no choice," said Bill Rapple, CEO of the Draper Area Chamber of Commerce.

Rep. Paul Ray, R-Clearfield, said, "My concern is what are the feds actually going to require, and what is the cost going to be to the state level?"

Buttars distributed the 1,600 page house bill to every lawmaker in the room, then testified to the panel he co-chairs.

"I look at the post office and how they're run, and now I'm going to turn the entire health system over to the government? And I get chills down my back," Buttars said.

But Knight says reform is desperately needed. Health insurance woes led her to take a job at in the Alpine School District just so she'd have insurance after she shut down her business.

"It is heartbreaking. It's something I built myself. It's very fulfilling and creative. I love those children, and it breaks my heart to do that. I had no choice," she said.

Printing those huge stacks of paper wasn't cheap. Eighteen copies were made of the 1,600 page document -- that's 29,000 pages, printed on one side. Total cost to state taxpayers? We checked: it's \$1,469.