

Utahns urged to sign health-care letter

By James Thalman Deseret News

Published: Friday, Dec. 12, 2008 12:18 a.m. MST

A group of Utahns wants to remind President-elect Barak Obama that the U.S. health-care system is still broken, was broken before the economy went broke, and fixing it must be the tippy-top domestic priority in 2009.

While the recession ripples may be dramatic, health-care advocates say any repairs to the economy won't stick without at least having a working blueprint for a fundamental, comprehensive medical care system.

With that in the mind, they are urging the public to sign a letter to Obama and Congress urging both to move health-care reform beyond the "good idea" stage.

Utah is making some progress drawing and quartering health-care reform the past 18 months, and organizers say they don't want to lose the momentum.

Judy Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project in Salt Lake, notes that while Utah is one of the states taking reform into its own hands, pressure to put it off again is mounting.

Forty-seven million Americans, including at least 388,000 Utahns, have no medical insurance, and health care costs five times more than any other industrialized country. But Americans are less healthy, tend to have more premature heart attacks and have the highest rates of obesity compared to other countries.

Utah ranks 10th nationwide for highest number of uninsured children, and health-care costs are far outpacing increases in income by 15 to 27 percent.

"The tipping point came long ago, but health-care services cost too much for most people so we buy medical insurance to pay — or at least help pay — the bills," Hilman said. Now the premiums are "so expensive, people can't afford insurance."

Multiple surveys have shown that the chief worry among the myriad economic woes is people won't be able to take care of medical needs such as doctors visits and prescription medications.

The letter states that opinion polls showed prior to the election that the public believes the best way to improve the current economic situation would be reducing health-care costs and providing health care to all Americans.

Hilman and others are doing everything they can to make sure that the latest call for reform isn't lost in the wider economic recovery shell game. Previous attempts have generated a "leave it alone and it will go away" response in Congress generally, Hilman said.

Despite its problems, the Utah system is actually a national model in terms of quality and value of its health care. Reform efforts here are also being closely watched by lawmakers and governors in other states where health care is in much worse shape.

"Utah will be instrumental in the debate, Hilman said.

"And we need to ensure our Utah values are reflected on the national front" — private, market based, bipartisan and financially sustainable, she said.

Local reform project leaders say health care would be front and center in public debate were it not for the recession.

"But health-care reform is back in the picture, not by someone forcing it into the spotlight but because so many people are demanding it because they're unhappy and often rightfully so with the course of treatment," said Rep. David Clark, R-Santa Clara and co-chairman of the special Legislative Task Force on Health Care System Reform.

Clark said he's worried that Congress might rush to a solution after jumping to the wrong conclusions.

"There are many, even untold ways this effort could go wrong, and taking steps because that's what people are saying we desperately need now is not the way to correct an industry that is more complicated by several factors than any sector of the economy," said Clark, a banker. In any case, whatever the states do, they can't do it without federal partnering, Clark said. "And I hope that the federal government feels just as compelled to partner back."

To join the signing effort or for more information, visit www.healthpolicyproject.org. or call 801-433-2299. The deadline is Dec. 18.