

Residents have chance to speak about health system reforms

BY PATRICE ST. GERMAIN • THE SPECTRUM.COM • MARCH 20, 2009

Right now there is momentum for national health system reforms and a meeting scheduled for Wednesday will give people in the community a chance to weigh in on the debate.

Jessica Kendrick, community engagement director of Utah Health Policy Project, said the statewide discussion will look at what some of the proposals are in the state and how the proposals will tie in to what is being discussed on a national level, and the role Utah and its Legislature will play.

The event, and the discussion about national health system reforms, couldn't come at a better time with many people not only losing their jobs but their health insurance as well.

"We are trying to get people excited about this comprehensive health system reform that the state and country desperately need," Kendrick said.

Utah Health Policy Project is a resource for the public, community leaders, businesses, health care providers and policy makers interested in strengthening the health care system while working to develop visionary and systemic solutions to the crisis of the uninsured and rising health care costs. The discussion Wednesday will take place at Dixie Regional Medical Center and look at health system reforms that President Obama and Congressional leaders have promised action on and to see how Utah will contribute to the debate.

Terri Draper, spokeswoman for Dixie Regional Medical Center, said health care really begins with individual accountability and using health care resources in the widest and most efficient way possible. "The best way to do that is to have everyone access a program that can help cover the costs of health care," Draper said. "Right now, more than 300,000 people in Utah are without health care insurance." Last year Dixie Regional Medical Center provided \$17 million in charity care, up about \$4 million from the year before.

That figure doesn't include the bad debt the hospital incurs from non-paying patients. Draper said one out of every eight or nine people seen at the hospital is either charity care or bad debt which increases the cost of health care and shifts the burden to those with health insurance through higher premiums.

Adding to the mix are the patients with Medicare and Medicaid where the reimbursement is less, leaving the hospital to absorb additional costs. "Providing access to everyone for health care is an important initiative," Draper said.

Something that may help with health care costs is the open enrollment for adults through Utah's Primary Care Network (PCN).

Open enrollment starts Monday and runs until the end of April for qualifying uninsured adults. PCN is a primary preventive health coverage plan for uninsured adults. Benefits include physician services, prescriptions, dental services, eye exams, emergency room visits, emergency medical transportation, birth control, and general preventive services.

Kendrick said anyone may attend the health system reform meeting on Wednesday that is very timely as national partners from insurance companies, health care providers and citizen's committees are all at the table and taking about what can be done to solve the problem.

"These groups are committed that we can't have second best," Kendrick said.

Kendrick said meetings around the state will ensure that Utah is engaged and involved with the national health system reforms.

"We want people to be engaged in the debate," Kendrick said. "We are feeling positive that national reforms could slow down costs and make sure everyone expands coverage access to care and have quality as well."