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Wyoming Gov. Mead wants state alternative to federal health reform

By JOSHUA WOLFSON Casper Star-TribuneThe Billings Gazette | Posted: Tuesday, September 13, 2011 11:45 pm | No Comments Posted

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CASPER, Wyo. — Wyoming needs a viable state alternative to federal health care reform, an adviser to Gov. Matt Mead said Tuesday.

Mead feels strongly the state can't oppose the federal law without pursuing its own strategy for improving health care in Wyoming, health care policy adviser Elizabeth Hoy said at a Casper conference focused on health reform.

The governor's health care strategy has three major parts:

- Increasing information technology in the health care arena.
- Supporting changes to Wyoming's health care delivery system by fostering an environment that allows the private sector to make improvements.
- Using the state's purchasing power to leverage better value.

"We want to focus on making sure that everything we do as a state improves the health outcomes for our population and our citizens," Hoy said.

Her comments capped the Wyoming Health Care Symposium, a daylong event aimed at helping the public understand the Affordable Care Act passed last year by Congress. The event was organized by One Health Voice, a coalition of Wyoming organizations seeking to improve access to health care.

Mead opposes the federal law. He believes its approach won't work in Wyoming and that the individual mandate — a provision requiring citizens to purchase coverage — is unconstitutional.

But unless the law is struck down, Wyoming will have to implement it, Hoy said.

Hoy was asked whether the governor is committed to universal health care for people in Wyoming. She said she hadn't discussed it with Mead.

"I do know the governor is committed to affordable, value-based, high-quality care," she said.

As health care costs jump, the number of small businesses in Wyoming that provide coverage to employees continues to drop, according to figures presented at the conference. In 2010, only 29 percent offered health insurance to employees — the lowest rate in the region.

A state committee is studying options for an insurance exchange that advocates say would help small businesses offer coverage for workers. The Wyoming Health Benefits Exchange Steering Committee meets Wednesday in Casper.

The exchanges — basically a marketplace where businesses and individuals can shop for insurance — are a key component of the Affordable Care Act. They have the potential to drive down costs through competition, said Lynn Quincy, a senior policy analyst at Consumers Union.

Exchanges provide a way for consumers to understand insurance information in a meaningful way, Quincy said.

The committee is looking at several models for a Wyoming exchange. Some lawmakers have expressed interest in the system used by neighboring Utah.

But Judi Hilman, executive director of the Utah Health Policy Project, told the conference that her state's exchange was a "complete failure." Utah has roughly 67,000 small businesses, but only 165 participate in the exchange, she said.

The Utah exchange suffered when lawmakers there removed an individual mandate provision, Hilman said. It was also tainted as a left-wing concept in a politically conservative state.

"What it is, is more like a flea market and less like Travelocity," she said, referring to the online travel site.

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