

Meeting to offer explanations

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ST. GEORGE - In an effort to help residents unravel some of the complexities involved with proposed health care reform, a panel of health policy experts will participate in a meeting on the topic Thursday in St. George.

"We wanted to hold this as an open discussion, to let people know what's in the legislation, and how it can affect them and their families," said Jessica Kendrick, community engagement director for the Utah Health Policy Project, a nonprofit group based in Salt Lake City that has come out in support of President Barack Obama's plan for health care reform.

Several residents without health care have offered to share their stories, Kendrick said, followed by a presentation and a question-and-answer session with a local physician, small business owners, concerned residents, a health policy expert and a representative from the office of Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah.

While members of Congress spend August discussing the ins and outs of health care reform, localized meetings throughout the country have yielded strong opinions and a slew of questions regarding an issue that affects all Americans personally.

"There is a lot floating around out there," Kendrick said. "It is very complex."

The U.S. Census Bureau released estimates last week that indicated one of every six Utah residents under the age of 65 was without health insurance in 2006 - right at the peak of the housing boom and economic growth.

Utah ranked 31st out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia in that statistic, with the census estimating that more than 400,000 Utahns under the age of 65 were without health insurance that year.

"My husband and I have been in that place, and it's hard," said Rose Campbell, a St. George resident who said she will attend the meeting, hoping to see a reasonable debate on the issue, rather than just partisan bickering.

"I just think it's so critical for our country that we start working together a little bit," she said.

Most Democrats, including a majority of Blue Dog Democrats, have supported some form of the administration's plan for health care reform, but Matheson voted against a version of the bill during a vote of the Energy and Commerce Committee last month, maintaining that the bill would give too much

power to the federal government and do too little to address concerns with medical-malpractice claims. He has stated a need for health care reform, but said he wants to take more time with the issue.

Mike Empey, a representative from Matheson's Southern Utah office, said he plans to use the meeting to gather public input.

"It's just been really interesting," Empey said of the health care debate. "There are really strong feelings on this. Some people are very hopeful that, through legislation, they'll be able to access health insurance and there are other people who are just adamantly opposed to having the government involved in any way."

The meeting is scheduled for 5 p.m. at the St. George Library. Because of space limitations, organizers have asked that interested parties RSVP before attending.