

Speaking up on health reform

BY PATRICE ST. GERMAIN • PATRICES@THESPECTRUM.COM • DECEMBER 23, 2008

ST. GEORGE - In Utah, there are 338,000 people who are not covered by any type of health care insurance, which ranks the state 10th in the nation for uninsured children.

A discussion today will give participants a chance to discuss the health care system as part of a national reform as President-elect Barack Obama believes that every American should have high-quality and affordable health care.

Co-sponsored by the Utah Health Policy Project and the Association for Utah Community Health, six meetings are scheduled around the state. So far, the response in the St. George area has been tremendous, said Jessica Kendrick, community engagement director for the Utah Healthy Policy Project.

"Right now, I think we will have the best turnout in St. George, which is really exciting," Kendrick said.

Those who have signed up for the discussion have received a participant guide giving an overview of the problem, policy background and Obama's health care plan.

Obama and Health and Human Services secretary nominee Tom Daschle have requisitioned nationwide grass-roots input on national health reform.

Kendrick said those participating in the state meetings will give people a chance to add their input for this national reform.

With the economic downturn and people once covered by insurance losing jobs and benefits, Kendrick said this is a timely topic, especially as there is talk of services and eligibility to state programs at risk because of budget cuts.

"There is a lot of talk about cutting services and eligibility at a time people need it the most," Kendrick said.

Rep. Brad Last, R-Dist. 71, said there is little doubt that the state legislators will make cuts in every department, including the health department.

Last said it's a difficult decision to make, especially with Medicaid cuts, which cut every dollar because of matching funds.

A cut of \$1 million to Medicaid ends up as a cut of \$3 to \$4 million because of matches. Last said there is no doubt that as the economy weakens, those cuts are especially hard as more people become dependent on Medicaid.

Last said the difficult job of a Legislator is trying to establish priorities.

"There's a lot of high priorities and not enough money to meet all the demands. The decisions are hard for us, too," Last said.

Kendrick said a guide provided to all participants is the heart of the discussion as it covers how to make health care affordable, looks at the type of system - such as employer-based - what works best and how to cover all Americans.

"This will give us lots of good input and lots of different discussions," Kendrick said.