

Huntsman signs a series of health-care bills into law

By James Thalman Deseret Morning News - Published: Thursday, March 20, 2008 12:26 a.m. MDT

A series of bills that make the notion of improving Utah's health-care system a reality were signed into law Wednesday by Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr.

Huntsman took the usual private signing of legislation into the public spotlight, not only to mark the end of the effort to get the framing language of the health-care reform in place but to remind the public that, like it or not, "the time for change is now."

Reforming a health-care system so it costs a lot less, provides better services and is available to literally every Utahn is an idea that not easily said or easily done, the governor said. But that's no reason for the state not to take advantage of its last, best chance to make those changes in a system that will literally eat the economy if left to run rampant.

"It would be irresponsible to do nothing. So we have backed up as a community and decided to do something," Huntsman added.

Using part of that community as a backdrop — the offices of Richter 7, a small Salt Lake City advertising agency — the governor and legislative leadership called on the business community, medical service providers and individual Utahns to take on the challenge.

Providing health insurance for its 50 employees is second only to the cost of labor — even rent costs less, said co-owner Peggy Lander.

That's just one of the problems the reform effort will address. Many businesses have dealt with rising costs of insurance premiums that past few years by dropping medical benefits altogether. The approach worries Huntsman and businesses both because 80 percent of Utahns get insurance through the workplace.

Annual health insurance and access survey results released Wednesday by the state Department of Health show that 37 percent of the 287,200 Utahns without insurance lost coverage because an employer dropped the benefit.

Just getting the basic framework to know how to approach the problem has taken more than a year. Tangible courses of action to streamline an overpriced and over utilized industry will developed by a task force whose members will most likely be appointed next week and begin meeting in April. Their recommendations must be on the table by this November, under one of the bills Huntsman signed Wednesday.

John Nielsen, Huntsman's health-care advisor, said the task force will have to work through a maze of complications. Those include the desires of the public and private sector, and also to "avoid getting the whole thing into a death spiral" that a few other states are going through right now by demand overwhelming services and budgets.

"You're dealing with individual lives and a very significant way of helping people make sure their lives are kept whole and that they can move forward," said Sen. Sheldon Killpack, assistant majority whip. "It's critical that we move forward in the right way."

It's up to individuals to move the right way as well, said Judi Hilman, Executive Director of the Health Policy Project. With premiums increasing at three times the rate of wages and small businesses having to reduce or cut benefits to stay in business, "the only choice is to make the most of these opportunities."