

HEALTH CARE COALITION LOBBIES FOR CHANGES

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COALITION URGES EXPANSION OF ACCESS TO HEALTH INSURANCE

RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH
October 1, 2009
Michael Martz

Virginia doesn't need to wait for comprehensive health-care reforms to expand care for children and working parents.

That was the message yesterday from a broad coalition of almost 60 health-care organizations -- from physicians, hospitals and nursing homes to free clinics and advocates for the poor.

The coalition, called Healthcare for All Virginians, decried the state's low ranking in providing health-care insurance for children and working families. Virginia currently ranks 48th in the country in spending on the Medicaid program for the poor.

"We're not Louisiana, but we're knocking on the door when it comes to supporting safety-net programs," said Christopher S. Bailey, senior vice president at the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association.

Virginians pay a higher share of work-based health insurance premiums, at 24 percent, than residents of any state in the country, according to statistics released by the coalition at a news conference yesterday at the state Capitol.

More than 1 million Virginians are uninsured, even though 600,000 of them have full-time jobs. Virginia ranks 44th in the country in eligibility of working parents for health insurance under the Medicaid program for the poor -- a family of three cannot earn more than \$6,000 a year for parents to be eligible.

"You really see the pressure that working people in Virginia . . . are facing," said Michael Cassidy, executive director of The Commonwealth Institute, an advocacy group based in Richmond.

The coalition did not take positions on health-care reforms pending in Congress, but instead focused on steps Virginia policymakers can take now to expand access to health insurance, especially for children.

For example, the coalition urged state lawmakers to take advantage of a new federal law that would provide \$111 million to Virginia over two years to insure more children under the State Children's Health Insurance Program. The state would have to match the federal money by one-third and expand eligibility to children living in families with incomes up to 300 percent of the federal poverty limit, or \$66,150 for a family of four. The change would extend coverage to an estimated 20,000 uninsured children who aren't eligible under the program's current threshold of 200 percent of the federal poverty limit.

Advocates say the state also is doing a poor job of reaching an estimated 100,000 children who already are eligible for health-care coverage under the program, and that could reduce federal funding in the future.

"If we don't spend money on insuring children in Virginia, we will lose federal dollars," said Jill A. Hanken, staff attorney at the Virginia Poverty Law Center.

The groups also want to ensure that doctors and other health-care providers don't lose more money by serving people in the state's Medicaid program.

"Our message is hold the line," said spokeswoman Joy Bechtold Jones. "We need to protect the level of available health care. Our message is it's at risk."

Doctors and other providers say they already receive a fraction of their cost to serve Medicaid patients. They are concerned that Virginia could cut reimbursements lower to make up an estimated \$1.8 billion shortfall in the Medicaid program after federal stimulus money runs out next year. If that happens, doctors may cut back on service to Medicaid patients.

"We are concerned that the welfare of our patients in the current environment is at risk," said Dr. Samuel T. Bartle, an emergency room pediatrician at VCU Medical Center.

http://www2.timesdispatch.com/rtd/news/state_regional/article/HLTH01_20090930-222203/296647/

VA WORKERS PAY THE HIGHEST RATE IN THE NATION FOR HEALTH COVERAGE

PUBLIC NEWS SERVICE

October 1, 2009

RICHMOND, Va. - Virginia is consistently ranked in the top five states to do business, yet by many measures, Virginia workers are being left behind on health care. A new scorecard on health insurance finds they contribute more to their employer-based insurance plans than do employees in any other state in the nation: 24 percent on average in 2008.

The data is part of a scorecard on health care by a new coalition of nearly 60 groups aligned to support Virginians' health care priorities. Healthcare for All Virginians includes hospitals, health care centers, faith-based groups and consumer organizations.

Joy Bechtold Jones with Healthcare for All Virginians says one key area needing improvement is insuring children. Virginia joins 10 states in the nation that have more uninsured children today than 15 years ago. Jones says even in an era of tight budgets, money is available that could help cover kids.

"When it comes to children's health insurance, there's a two-to-one match: For every dollar Virginia spends, we get two dollars from the federal government. We think that Virginia would be wise to invest resources where there's a return."

Getting these dollars will not put pressure on the state budget, Jones points out.

"There are funds that will come from the federal government, and we'd like to see a small portion of those dedicated to health care and increasing coverage for the uninsured."

More information on the health care scorecard can be found at www.HavCare.org.

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VIRGINIA GROUP: WIDEN HEALTH INSURANCE ACCESS

LYNCHBURG NEWS & ADVANCE

Media General News Service

October 1, 2009

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http://www2.newsadvance.com/lna/news/local/article/virginia_group_widen_health_insurance_access/19986/

WILLIAMS: VIRGINIA MUST FIND ITS HEART IN HEALTH CARE DEBATE

RICHMOND TIMES DISPATCH

October 3, 2009

Michael Paul Williams

The candidates in Virginia's gubernatorial race keep talking about investing in education and transportation.

How about investing in the health and well-being of the state's most vulnerable residents?

Virginia ranks 48th nationally in per-capita Medicaid expenditures. Our eligibility standards are among the most stringent in the nation, providing coverage to parents whose incomes after deductions are at 30 percent or lower of the federal poverty standard -- less than \$6,000 per year for a family of three. The national Medicaid eligibility limit is 65 percent of the poverty level.

Virginia is among only 10 states with more uninsured children today -- 167,000 -- than 15 years ago.

How can this be?

Forbes magazine rates us as the top state for business. We're ranked eighth nationally in per-capita income by the Bureau of Economic Analysis.

What should be an embarrassment passes for a tradition in the Old Dominion.

"I look at Virginia and see it has a long history of being very fiscally conservative," said Jill Hanken, staff attorney with the Virginia Poverty Law Center. "And it's never treated health care as a core service of government."

Fiscal conservatism is not always a virtue.

Hanken says human-services programs haven't developed here the way they have in other states.

"It's been neglected over the years," she said. "We have a lot of ground to make up. And while the debate is going on in Washington, there are a lot of steps we can take."

Healthcare for All Virginians is a diverse coalition of 60 organizations -- representing the medical field, children, retirees and the poor --that is pushing state lawmakers to address the health-care shortcomings. It wants the state to cover all uninsured children, ensure adequate payment to Medicaid providers and improve coverage for working Virginia parents.

Its members say Virginia cannot afford to wait for whatever health-care reforms will come down from Washington. Implementation of those reforms wouldn't begin for several years.

"Uninsured children shouldn't have to wait for full implementation of national health reform to get the care that they need," Hanken said.

You don't have to be poor to feel the health-care pinch in our state. Virginia workers pay the greatest share of individual premiums (24 percent) in the nation, according to a survey by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

But the working poor and their offspring are particularly at risk.

"I think a lot of it does definitely reflect our priorities and our choices we've made in public policy and legislation over the years," said Michael Cassidy, executive director of the Commonwealth Institute for Fiscal Analysis.

Over the past several decades, Virginia has become a much wealthier state with a higher level of income, he said, but "we haven't really brought along our social safety-net programs with us."

The diagnosis? We're an affluent state with impoverished values, a paucity of compassion and shortsighted vision.

The prognosis is grim unless our lawmakers develop a heart.

http://www2.timesdispatch.com/rtd/news/columnists_news/article/MIKE03_20091002-222407/297107/

STATE'S SCORES SICKLY

FREDERICKSBURG FREELANCE STAR

October 3, 2009

Bill Freehling

Virginia may be the best state in the nation for business, but a report released this week says the Old Dominion lags behind in ensuring affordable health care for its workers and residents.

That's the conclusion of a new coalition called Healthcare for All Virginians. The coalition of hospitals and health care groups puts out a "rollout presentation" on its Web site Wednesday, following the Forbes magazine announcement that Virginia was the best state for business for the fourth straight year.

"The No. 1 state for business should lead by example when it comes to ensuring the health of its citizens and work force," the coalition stated on its PowerPoint presentation.

Healthcare for All Virginians is calling for increased investment in health care coverage to ensure that all Virginians have access to affordable care. It says quality health care is the responsibility of individuals, health providers, employers and the government.

Neither MediCorp Health System, Pratt Medical Center nor Mary Washington Hospital was among the 59 hospitals and organizations that formed the coalition. The group, however, includes such organizations as the American Heart Association, the Medical Society of Virginia and Inova Health Systems.

Coalition spokeswoman Joy Bechtold Jones said Healthcare for All Virginians was formed about two years ago. The founders began by discussing mission and priorities, and later recruited members to work on a health care "scorecard."

Here are among the coalition's findings published this week. The full report is at HavCare.org.

Virginia is among 10 states with more uninsured children today (167,000) than 15 years ago.

The state has experienced the fourth-largest drop nationally in worker health-insurance coverage over the past 15 years.

Virginia ranks 31st nationally in income eligibility in state-sponsored children's health coverage.

The state ranks 48th nationally in Medicaid expenditures, and 44th on Medicaid income eligibility limits for working parents.

Virginia's workers pay the greatest share of individual health-insurance premiums in the nation. Virginia workers pay a 24 percent share, while the national average is 20 percent.

<http://www.fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2009/102009/10032009/498045>

MONEY TALKS HEALTH CARE DISCUSSION

FREDERICKSBURG FREELANCE STAR

October 6, 2009

Description: Fred Rankin, CEO for MediCorp, will be here to answer your health care-related questions.

Question: (from RE in King George) -- What is your reaction to the findings of the report released last week by Healthcare for All Virginians? It essentially said Virginia isn't doing enough to make sure all residents have access to quality healthcare. <http://havcare.org/>

Fred Rankin's answer: -- The information in this report is not new news. Virginia has historically had a very low cost Medicaid program. This shows up in two ways. The first is that the eligibility for Medicaid in Virginia is very narrow. The second is the amount of reimbursement health care providers receive from the Medicaid program. This year, hospitals receive 76 cents for every dollar spent on caring for a Medicaid patient. In the next budget cycle in Virginia, the Medicaid shortfall is expected to be \$1.8 Billion. We all need to talk to our elected officials to advocate for the Medicaid program in this State.

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hoVPy1SFyqxldy-1SLceu9yRgK1wD9BAB58G2>

SHIFTING THE BURDEN

ROANOKE TIMES

October 11, 2009

Editorial

Virginia's stingy Medicaid program leaves private plans picking up a big part of the health care tab.

Whether Congress will enact meaningful health care reform this year -- or any year, for that matter -- is still very much a toss up. Regardless, there are things Virginia can do to improve the health of its youngsters and their parents while at the same time ease the ever-increasing insurance premium burden on businesses and their employees.

A coalition of 59 health providers and purchasers, called Health Care for All Virginians, aims to educate the public and lawmakers about the state of health care in Virginia and the steps needed to improve it. Most especially, they wish to prevent any further cuts to the state's already stingy Medicaid program.

The coalition held a press conference recently in Richmond and is sharing much of the information it's gathered on its Web site, www.havcare.org.

Here are just a few facts to think about:

The number of Virginians receiving health coverage through work has declined from 67 percent in 2005-2006 to 63 percent in 2007-2008.

Worker premiums for employer-provided coverage have increased 78 percent for family coverage since 2000, with employers passing along more of the premium cost to employees.

Virginia workers pay the highest percent of the total premium cost for single coverage in the nation and the ninth highest for family coverage.

One of the reasons that insurance is so costly in Virginia is that the state's Medicaid program fails to pay the full cost of medical treatments. Also, its program shuts out all but the very poorest of adults. Working low-income parents whose children qualify aren't covered themselves.

Someone, though, has to pay the bill when government programs don't. That cost is passed along to businesses and their workers.

A state that prides itself on its business-friendly climate can do better.

The coalition is pushing for reform on a small, reasonable scale. First, Virginia must take great care not to make its programs any worse as it looks for necessary budget savings.

Next, it can do better reaching out to cover the estimated 100,000 children who qualify now for programs but are not enrolled.

Then, comes the politically hard part: raising income thresholds so that another 67,000 uninsured children can be reached and extending eligibility to their parents to purchase coverage through Virginia's Family Access to Medical

Insurance Security Plan. In doing so, Virginia would qualify for additional federal funds to offset the cost at a rate of \$2 to \$1.

It wouldn't be just the currently uninsured who benefit. Over time, it could reduce costs for all.

<http://www.roanoke.com/editorials/wb/221928>