

Advocates tout governor's health plan

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ALTON — Proponents of universal health care made rounds Tuesday in editorial meetings to tout Gov. Rod Blagojevich's Illinois Covered plan.

"We don't look at this as the governor's plan. This is bigger than the governor," said Jim Duffett, executive director of the Campaign for Better Health Care, about Blagojevich's plan to cover all Illinoisans. Duffett spoke with Telegraph editors and reporters during a meeting Tuesday in the newsroom.

In Illinois, 18 percent of adults, or about 1.4 million people between the ages of 19 and 64, are uninsured. Across the country, four out of five uninsured Americans are in working families.

Duffett; Jan Daker, leader of the United Congregations of Metro East Health Care Task Force; lead task force organizer Ken Aud; and Jeff Rains, United Steelworkers Retirees REUNION leader, led a media briefing earlier Tuesday in East St. Louis to expose what they called "big lies to drive a stake in the heart of health care reform."

Duffett pointed out that attempts at health care reform are not new.

"We tried in '91, '92 and '93. All the air was sucked out of the campaigns," Duffett said. He said health care reform had to happen at the state level, because the federal government would not implement reform until "hell freezes over.

"We think it's in the legislators' hands to finance this," Daker said.

Among other data, the proponents based their statements on a recent study by economist Ken Thorpe, who took all of his analysis information from think tanks and hospital statistics.

"He found if we do nothing in the next four years, it will cost the state \$15.6 billion," Duffett said. "We can do nothing, or we can do a Medicaid-like system, which was a joke then and now, or go to a high deductible."

In four years, individuals and businesses in Illinois would save \$15.6 billion in health care premiums with a 9 percent decrease. Some of the main reasons for the savings would be decreases in cost-shifting and chronic illnesses, Duffett said. He noted that 20 percent of the population incur 80 percent of Illinois health care costs because of chronic illness and that those fortunate enough to have health care coverage are paying more for those individuals to be covered.

Duffett also said computerizing medical records would save money. Record maintenance and processing represents up to 20 percent of the operating costs of private insurance companies.

He said the uninsured pay for about 35 percent of the cost of their health care out of their own pockets. Government programs also pay a portion of the cost of their care. The remaining amount — sometimes called “uncompensated care” — is built into the rates that hospitals and doctors charge insurance plans. Insurers then pass this cost on to insured Illinoisans by raising health insurance premiums.

Duffett explained that Illinois Covered would expand eligibility for public programs and that adults with incomes up to 400 percent of the federal poverty level, which is \$82,600 a year for a family of four in 2007, would get help paying for their health insurance premiums. All Illinois managed care plans also would offer a product called Covered Choices that is designed to be affordable for small businesses and individuals.

“We have a unique opportunity in Illinois with Illinois Covered, and it might push the issue to the federal level,” Duffett said. “We should do it now, because otherwise, it will be a long time.”

For Thorpe’s full report from his recent study, go to www.americasagenda.org.