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Carrying the banner for health care

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Official disputes claims of Illinois Covered opponents

Jim Duffett, executive director of the Illinois Campaign for Better Health Care, (ICBHC) met Tuesday with local advocates to lay to rest claims of opponents of the proposed Illinois Covered health care plan.

ICBHC is a statewide coalition of more than 300 local and state organizations that represent consumers, health care workers and providers, community organizations, seniors; religious groups, labor and disability rights organizations and other state residents who are concerned about health care and wellness.

About 1.4 million people in Illinois between the ages of 19 and 64 are uninsured and the number is rising every day. Many have jobs that do not provide health insurance, some are college students past the age for family coverage, and some are laid off or between jobs and many simply cannot afford the premiums for insurance coverage.

Duffett said the uninsured pay for about 35 percent of the cost of their health care out of their own pockets, often at great sacrifice. Government programs also pick up a portion of the cost of their care. The remaining amount, often called "uncompensated care," is built into the rates that hospitals and doctors charge insurance plans and the insurers then pass this cost on to insured Illinoisans by raising their health insurance premiums.

It is estimated that premiums for Illinois families with employer-based health insurance will be \$1,130 higher in 2007 due to the cost of this uncompensated care.

Under Illinois Covered, adults with incomes up to 400 percent of poverty level (about \$82,600 a year for a family of four) will be able to get help paying for their health insurance premiums. In addition, all Illinois managed care plans will offer a plan called Covered Choices, designed to be more affordable for small businesses and individuals.

Duffett characterized as lies claims that health care reform came up too suddenly. He said the ICBHC has worked on this issue since 1989 and bills for health care reform were introduced in Springfield in 1992 and for several legislative sessions thereafter.

"In the mid-90s, George Ryan initiated Kid Care," Duffett said. "Next came Family Care and All Kids Care."

The bi-partisan Adequate Health Care Committee appointed by Gov. Rod Blagojevich and the Democratic and Republican leaders of both houses of the General Assembly had public hearings throughout the state where more than 400 people gave testimony about their health care needs and problems.

Duffett said several entities presented their health-care reform plans, including the Chamber of Commerce, hospital associations, insurance companies, single-payer proponents and ICBHC.

"There has been plenty of public debate about this," he said. "(We told the legislators) we put together the plan and it's a compromise with everyone's input given consideration, now you come up with a way to pay for it."

Jan Daker, a member of the Adequate Health Care Committee representing the United Congregations of Metro East, attended the public hearings and agreed with Duffett.

"People are crying out for help," she said.

Duffett said claims that the plan would take effect too soon are not valid because the plan will be phased in and not finalized until 2011. He said claims that financing such a health care plan as Illinois Covered would be costly to businesses are also specious.

The cost of the plan is estimated to be \$7.2 billion by 2011, but the savings due to reduced growth in private health-insurance premiums and other reduced costs would be \$15.6 billion representing a net savings of \$8.4 billion.

"In other words, for each \$1 of public revenues spent on Illinois Covered will generate more than \$2 in new health care savings," Duffett said. He said the savings would be mainly through the reduced growth of health insurance premiums paid by Illinois businesses, families and individuals.

Daker said it is critical that supporters of the Illinois Covered plan tell their legislators how they feel about it. The plan has the support of hospitals, unions and the majority of doctors. Daker said it is a primary goal of UCM which has 26 member churches in the Metro East with a total of about 26,000 members.

The governor's proposal to fund health care, education, and to replenish the Illinois pension fund by imposing a gross receipts tax on corporations (GRT) was overwhelmingly defeated in a House Committee of the Whole last week.

"That was one plan," UCM Lead Organizer Ken Aud said of GRT. "Let's take another look."

All of the organizers said they and the constituents of Illinois legislators expect the legislators to come up with a creative way to finance Illinois Covered.

Jeff Rains, volunteer coordinator for United Steel Workers retirees, said they are people who understand the issue after all retirees lost their health coverage when US Steel took over Granite City Steel. Their coverage was used as a bargaining chip in the buyout.

"The governor's making a bold move," Rains said. "But, we'd like to see it countrywide. It would be helpful for the country both economically and physically."

Duffett said it would be great, but it isn't likely to happen. He said excuses claiming the federal government will take care of health care reform are nebulous at best. It is likely to be a campaign issue in the next general election, but not likely to be acted upon by this Congress or the next.

For more information about Illinois Campaign for Better Health Care, go to its Web site at www.cbhconline.org.

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