

State should take lead on health care

By Myrna Felix

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Our health-care system is broken and desperately needs fixing now. Springfield is not alone in struggling with this problem. This is a national crisis, with more than 46 million Americans lacking health coverage - including 1.4 million uninsured Illinoisans.

Our community has some of the finest health-care providers in the nation; however, if patients can't access even the most basic health care when they need it, the expert care is often too little, delivered too late. The sad truth is that uninsured men, women and children often delay medical treatment for too long, even when obviously needed, because a visit to the doctor is not in the budget.

Too often, our uninsured neighbors are forced to sacrifice filling prescriptions because of cost and are unable to visit the specialists to which they are referred. Many uninsured people live with serious chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, heart disease or asthma that are sadly left untreated for extended periods.

But forgoing preventative care and basic health maintenance leads not only to greater suffering, but greater expenditure. While the plight of the uninsured is unconscionable and affects us emotionally - it also affects us financially. One-third of the expense of a medical crisis is paid by the uninsured themselves. Of these unpaid bills, a portion is met through various government programs. The remainder is shifted and added on, incurring larger health-care premiums for the insured.

Those who provide care are ironically denied health care.

Mary lives in Springfield, and works as a personal assistant delivering care to people in their own homes. A reliable and conscientious employee, she covers her own expenses for travel between clients. Earning barely over minimum wage, Mary finds health insurance unattainable. Personal assistants do not receive employer-sponsored insurance, yet these caregivers are charged with providing vital support to maintain the independence of so many members of our community.

There are too many people like Mary. The approximate number of uninsured personal assistants needed in Illinois is 275,000. Most part-time workers, and even some full-time employees, don't receive benefits. Employers would rather hire more part-time workers because they are not obligated to provide them costly insurance. In fact, in 2006, over 40 percent of Illinois' workers didn't have employer-provided coverage.

We are all subject to this health-care crisis and we must work together for a solution. The Adequate Health Care Task Force was commissioned by a piece of Illinois legislation - the Health Care Justice Act of 2004 - out of the belief that Illinois needs affordable, high-quality guaranteed health-care coverage for all Illinoisans now rather than waiting for a national health plan, which

may never be passed.

On March 7, Gov. Rod Blagojevich announced a plan to expand access to existing health-care programs and create an affordable quality option for all men and women and small businesses in Illinois. Illinois Covered relies very heavily on recommendations of the task force and has three main methods of achieving coverage: Illinois Covered Choice, a comprehensive, affordable package anyone without employer-sponsored coverage can purchase, and that small business owners can afford to offer their employees; Illinois Covered Rebate, financial assistance to help those up to 400 percent of the poverty level pay insurance premiums; Illinois Covered Assist, a new public program for very low-income families, consisting of expanded public programs - a good choice; a deserved rebate; a needed assist.

Should our Illinois' legislature reject a budget proposal that would provide sufficient funding for this initiative - while the needs of struggling working families and small businesses continue to be ignored - health-care premiums will skyrocket by \$30 billion over the next 10 years. We can't afford to wait.

I am joining fellow health-care advocates in Springfield - and uniting with thousands of citizens statewide - during Health Care Action Weeks, April 2-13, to demand that the General Assembly fully implement the Health Care Justice Act by enacting a plan for affordable, accessible, quality health care for all Illinoisans by July 1. A rally, tentatively scheduled for Monday, will open a dialogue with business leaders about their opposition to the governor's plan.

As a frustrated observer and concerned citizen and as a fellow human being who sees those who care for me not receiving the care they need (and have earned), I want to add my voice to the growing number of people who think that all Americans deserve access to health coverage - starting right here in Illinois. Reauthorizing and expanding health-care coverage is a critical first step.

For further information concerning the Campaign for Better Health Care, check their Web site at www.cbhconline.org. For more details about local events, contact Pete Roberts at Springfield Center for Independent Living, 523-2587 (v/tty).

Myrna Felix is an occasional contributor to this column.

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