

COLORADO LEADS THE RACE IN HEALTH CARE REFORM

by Kathleen Spring

Copyright by Kathleen Spring 2009

Colorado is not waiting around for the federal government to push through its public health care agenda. Governor Bill Ritter and our lawmakers have put out a proposed 2009 Health Care Reform Legislative Package. This set of building blocks to health care reform involved seven House Bills and two Senate Bills. The goal was to expand access, contain costs and improve quality. This would be the most significant health reform in 40 years. This landmark measure hopes to provide coverage to uninsured without costing taxpayers or businesses a penny more.

A push began in November of 2007, when, over six weeks, the Blue Ribbon Commission for Health Care Reform conducted a review of Colorado's health-care system. They held 11 meetings in nine communities across the state, talking to all the stakeholders. The goal was to discuss what the citizens wanted as far as health care. It started with the presumption that everyone should have access to care and coverage. Their results showed Coloradans wanted a stronger emphasis on access to care for everyone, due to its large rural population. Personal responsibility and common good were emphasized as Colorado-type principles. The coverage of children's health care became the first goal out of the report.

In spring, the Colorado legislature took its first steps in enacting these reforms, first with the coverage of children's health care, and then three more historically significant bills. This month, Colorado got access to \$40 million in federal funds being offered to states to give grants to grass roots and advanced technological groups who offer ways to reach eligible but uninsured children to enroll in state health plans. A couple of dozen community service providers got mini-grants in spring to put on kids health enrollment fairs to reach out to the estimated 153,000 Colorado children without health care coverage.

House Bill 1012 allows insurance companies to offer discounts and incentives to small business and their employees who participate in health and wellness programs. The Healthcare Affordability Act provides health care coverage to more than 100,000 uninsured Coloradans. House Bill 1103 allows patients in need of long-term care to be presumptively eligible for Medicaid. This last Bill could help save costs and improve patients' quality of life.

"HB 1103 could make Colorado the first in the nation to speed up the process of Medicaid eligibility for long-term care," said co-sponsor of the bill Sen. Linda Newell.

COLORADO PASSES 21 HEALTH CARE BILLS

On June 2008, Gov. Bill Ritter signed 11 health-care bills into law, including legislation at the heart of his Building Blocks to Health Care Reform plan and measures that provide coverage to thousands of uninsured children.

"These bills represent a solid foundation for continued progress toward better health care for all Coloradans," Gov. Ritter said. "They extend coverage to thousands of more children, improve mental health benefits, remove red tape, bring greater transparency to our health care system, enhance

private insurance coverage, and strengthen our overall public health infrastructure. This was a great legislative session for health care in Colorado.”

In June 2009, Gov. Ritter signed into law 10 health care and non-profit measures, including bills to help families cope with the high costs of caring for children with autism and to improve care in Colorado’s rural communities. These addressed the problem of medically under-served rural communities being able to recruit medical personnel and services.

In addition, Colorado is poised to be a national leader on the adoption and implementation of health care reform through its Health Information Technology (HIT). Colorado spends \$30 billion on health care each year. After a year of study, the HIT Advisory Committee released a new report in spring identifying how Colorado can significantly reduce costs, improve patient outcomes and make the state’s healthcare system more efficient and effective. The governor is in the process of implementing the first part of the plan through use of funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, also called the economic stimulus package.

“Our health-care system is fundamentally broken, and the flaws touch every person and every business in Colorado,” Gov. Ritter said. “Costs are skyrocketing. The availability of quality care is limited. Too many people lack insurance, and our public and private health networks are too complicated for most people to navigate. We must find solutions that are uniquely Colorado, solutions that are ambitious and realistic, solutions we can afford.”

It appears that the current slate of Colorado legislators is not waiting for laws to come down from Washington, but is being proactive in reducing health care costs and increasing coverage for its citizens, from the youngest child to the oldest senior.

###