
Local health care reform: Challenges and opportunities

Peter Long, Alan McKay, Bill Monning

What are the implications of national health care reform at the local level -- and specifically for Santa Cruz County? On an evening in early November, a group gathered to hear reflections on this question from two people who spend a lot of time considering health care reform at the federal, state, and local levels. Peter Long is president and CEO of the Blue Shield of California Foundation and a veteran of health policy debates from academic research as well as philanthropic perspectives. Assemblyman Bill Monning was elected in November 2008 to represent the 27th Assembly District, which includes portions of Santa Cruz, Monterey, and Santa Clara Counties. He is chairman of the Assembly Committee on Health.

The occasion for Long's and Monning's conversation was the seventh annual Board dinner of a unique local health coalition: the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County. HIP is a county-wide collaborative of health, foundation, and government leaders dedicated to increasing access to care and building a stronger health care delivery system in Santa Cruz County. Alan McKay, Executive Director of the Central California Alliance for Health and HIP's Board President, posed some questions to Long and Monning, as summarized below.

McKay: What do you see as the major opportunities and challenges of health care reform for those of us working at the local level?

Monning: Some of the opportunities are already happening -- insurance companies can no longer deny coverage on the basis of pre-existing conditions to those under the age of 19, which will be expanded to everyone in 2014, with no lifetime caps on coverage amounts. That's progress -- but there's still a ways to go. For example, the reforms don't include undocumented workers, which in California leaves huge gaps in coverage and germs and diseases certainly don't care whether you have a green card or not. The law also is headed to the Supreme Court, where it will probably be decided by one vote.

Long: Health care reform won't be self-implementing -- meaning that even as coverage is expanded to 4 or 5 million additional people in California, this won't happen automatically. The systems to enroll people who are eligible and to educate them about their options and how to access them -- that will take a lot of work and will be crucial to the reforms' success. Fortunately, Santa Cruz County already has experience with outreach and enrollment and with building these systems to reach people -- so that's an opportunity as well as a challenge.

Another major challenge will be providing health care to people once they are covered. We're already struggling to provide care to people because there isn't enough primary care capacity.

Monning: Community college programs like those at Cabrillo, Hartnell, and Cal State Monterey Bay are already training nurses and other allied health workers -- but we can do more. In this economy, that's an opportunity to address provider shortages and unemployment at the same time.

McKay: What else should we be doing at the local level?

Long: Continue your efforts to create value-based health care -- meaning that you are integrating health systems and information flow in ways that improve health outcomes for patients, but also lead to lower costs. Value-based health care is the direction we're moving in, no matter what happens with health care reform.

These comments are excerpts of a longer conversation. For more details about any of the organizations involved, please visit the Web sites below:

HIP -- www.hipscc.org

Blue Shield of California Foundation -- <http://www.blueshieldcafoundation.org/>

Assemblymember Bill Monning -- <http://asmcd.org/members/a27/>

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