

Locals send Obama health-care reform ideas

By JONDI GUMZ - Sentinel staff writer

About 120 people gathered Monday night at Dominican Hospital to help President-elect Barack Obama reform health care.

First they diagnosed the problems, then they prescribed solutions to fix a fractured system where too often the choice of a doctor is made by an insurance company. Among their conclusions:

- Employer-based health coverage is too costly for small businesses; single-payer health care is needed.
- Preventive services are essential; people need more information on how to maintain their health.
- Insurance companies aren't working; they should be taken out of the health care system.
- Primary care doctors are in short supply; reallocate financial incentives that attract physicians into specialty practices.

The gathering was one of 4,000 taking place across the nation.

Health care consumers from Boy Scouts to grandparents joined health care professionals to brainstorm in small groups. Despite their different perspectives, they agreed on many of the proposed solutions. Their recommendations will be posted at www.change.gov, the Web site of the Obama transition team.

"These opportunities don't come up very often," said Dr. Poki Namkung, Santa Cruz County's health officer. "We need to send a strong message."

Consumers described a variety of problem scenarios.

Santa Cruz attorney Emily Maloney, 77, is a member of Health Care for All, which is lobbying for universal coverage. She sees people going bankrupt because they can't pay their medical bills. She would ban drug companies from advertising to consumers.

Tim Sylvester, 45, a Santa Cruz resident who works in high-tech, said he had changed health insurance eight times in eight years as his employment situation changed. Each time, his health care coverage covered less, he said. He would like coverage he can depend on.

Bobbie Crafford, 79, of Santa Cruz, has had health care coverage through Kaiser since she joined in Berkeley 54 years ago. She considers it a model of success. She has to drive over the hill to see a doctor. She would like a program like Kaiser in Santa Cruz County.

Nurses and others working in health care also desired change.

Registered nurse Kathy Haber asked why so much money is spent on expensive medications that produce only slightly better outcomes.

Health educator Laurie Lang suggested national medical schools so doctors wouldn't start out their practices \$100,000 in debt.

Cheri Joseph, a registered nurse, would like to see more lifestyle training, such as how to eat properly and exercise to stay well.

"We need a plan for physical fitness," agreed Kathleen King of the Pajaro Valley Health Trust.

Majel Jordan, who works in elder care, wants to eliminate financial incentives that steer people to nursing facilities rather than serving them at home, which costs less.

Dr. Nanette Mickiewicz, president of Dominican Hospital, which organized the event, was pleased with the outcome.

"It exceeded our expectations," she said.

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