

Health leaders see significant benefits in health care reform

Some provisions of the recently passed Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act -- also known as health care reform -- have received more coverage and media attention, while others are less well-known and understood.

To help all of us understand the local implications of this federal legislation, we asked local health leaders to comment on some elements that they find particularly promising and potentially beneficial for Santa Cruz County residents. The leaders below are members of the Health Improvement Partnership HIP of Santa Cruz County, a local county-wide collaborative of health, foundation, government and community leaders.

HIP members wish to recognize Rep. Sam Farr for his leadership on national health care reform and for understanding that local-level innovation and collaboration continue to be critical to improving the health of Santa Cruz County residents.

Everybody Wins

In 2014, about 8,000 lower-income residents of Santa Cruz County will become newly eligible for Medi-Cal under federal reform. What will this mean for them, and for you? As new members of our regional, nonprofit Medi-Cal health plan, the Central California Alliance for Health, these 8,000 residents will have ensured access to primary care, preventive services and referrals, and assistance in staying well or managing their chronic disease. With meaningful health coverage, some important trend lines move in the right direction: down. Preventable illnesses and costs are minimized, emergency rooms are less crowded, and the "hidden tax" of the uninsured on commercial health insurance is reduced. Better access, better health, lower cost: everybody wins.

Alan McKay, Executive director, Central California Alliance for Health

Promoting wellness and coverage

Health reform adds preventive services to existing coverage and makes health insurance coverage more accessible and affordable for those who might not otherwise be able to purchase coverage on their own. Starting this year, insurance companies will no longer be able to deny coverage to children with pre-existing conditions, and the same provision will apply to adults in 2014 with high-risk insurance pools offering some options for adults with these conditions until then. People on Medicare or approaching that point in the next few years should rest assured that the proposed Medicare savings cannot reduce basic Medicare services such as physicians, diagnostics, laboratory tests, pharmacy benefits or hospital care.

Rama Khalsa, Director, Health Services Agency

Community clinics as the cornerstone

These first steps are only the beginning of reforms to a very complex health system in the United States. In Santa Cruz County, we have a strong network of community health clinics that will play an important role in providing primary and preventive care to the many residents who will now have access to health insurance coverage in the years to come. This includes young men and women who can be covered on their parents' plans up to the age of 26 as well as low-income single adults who were not eligible for coverage before. Both health care providers and patients will have greater incentives to offer and seek care in the well-organized, larger scope of practice models that are exemplified in our community clinics.

Sister Julie Hyer, OP, President/CEO, Salud Para La Gente

Expanding Medi-Cal and emphasizing primary care

Health care reform expands Medicaid called Medi-Cal in California in two important ways: by raising the income ceiling to make more people eligible and by making single adults without children eligible for coverage, along with low-income parents. Nationwide, this will allow up to 15 million people who were not eligible for coverage before to now have it -- and this, in turn, will help fund the care that we provide to everyone, insured or not, in community clinics. It's also important to note the bill's emphasis on the availability of primary care and reimbursement for physicians who provide it, because the expansion of coverage for all those newly insured people will not mean much if they can't actually get the care they need.

Patrick Meehan, Medical Director, Santa Cruz Women's Health Center

Paying for value, not volume

Although many issues remain unaddressed in the recently passed legislation particularly those affecting escalating costs, there are some promising elements, too. For a college town like Santa Cruz, one of the most tangible may be the provision allowing students to stay on their parents' health plans until they are 26. From a cost and innovation perspective, some of the language emphasizing Accountable Care Organizations where the financial fates of various providers are connected and competing providers work together to improve quality and reduce costs could help fund some pilot programs for which Santa Cruz County would be ideally suited. Increasing payments to primary care physicians and increasing the supply of primary care providers are also positive steps. The devil will be in the details and in how various provisions will be enforced. Still, the shift in tone -- towards expanding coverage, and paying for value instead of volume -- is important.

Lawrence deGhetaldi, President, Palo Alto Medical Foundation - Santa Cruz