

## **Bootstrap strategies for local health care reform**

*by Eleanor Littman*

It's probably safe to say that speakers at most health care reform forums don't have to compete with the sounds of barking seals as they wrestle with the difficult topic of reforming our broken health care system. On a sunny Friday this month, though, speakers and 140 attendees at the second annual Health Improvement Partnership HIP forum on health care reform took on this unique challenge.

HIP is not as visible as our spectacular coastline, but it is one of the things that makes our county unique. As Rep. Sam Farr said in his keynote, few places have been able to convene, as we have, a coalition of public and private health care leaders who cross their organizational boundaries for the common purpose of building a stronger local health care system. This year's forum is just one example of how HIP's members solicit creative ideas that will work locally -- without necessarily waiting for state and federal solutions. That's why the theme of this year's forum was "The Bootstrap Approach: Reforming Health Care at the Local Level." Bootstrap strategies are designed to improve individual health and overall public health, while stemming costs that ultimately are shared by our entire community.

Since HIP was launched in 2004, we have been able to "bootstrap" several local health care reform initiatives that already show results. For example, Make Your Wishes Known promotes planning and communication about end-of-life care -- part of the reason that 43 percent of adults in Santa Cruz County have Advance Directives on file, compared to 29 percent nationally. Directives promote dignity at the end of life, and also potentially reduce costs associated with expensive, unwanted treatment that does not change the patient's outcome or comfort. Healthy Kids, which subsidizes health insurance for children in low-income families, has enrolled over 9,500 local children in either Healthy Kids or other public programs. The kids are healthier, expensive hospitalizations and emergency room visits are reduced, parents have greater peace of mind -- and now 98 percent of our county's children are covered. A new campaign to prevent childhood obesity -- the 52-10 campaign -- is a bootstrap partnership between HIP and the local Go for Health! coalition. The campaign helps physicians, parents and others present a consistent, memorable and research-based message to kids: each and every day eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables, limit TV and computer-screen time to two hours, play vigorously for at least one hour and consume zero sugar-sweetened drinks.

The United States is unique among industrialized countries in tying health insurance coverage to employment. At the forum, we heard how four local employers -- Bookshop Santa Cruz, Driscoll's, Graniterock and the city of Santa Cruz -- are struggling to balance spiraling health care coverage costs with the needs of their employees. These local employers feel the pressure keenly and are responding with their own bootstrap innovations, from providing coverage for part-time workers and fully covering an initial portion of out-of-pocket deductibles Bookshop, to extensive workplace wellness options Graniterock, to contemplating mobile clinics for fieldworkers Driscoll's.

The Santa Cruz Chamber of Commerce, recognizing the powerful connection between health care costs and the growth potential of local businesses especially smaller, labor-intensive ones,

recently elevated health care as one of its six critical platform issues, joining transportation, water, housing, education and economic development.

The forum ended with reminders from participants to keep some health topics and populations front and center in the health care reform debate. These include the role of prevention, oral health, mental health and substance abuse, persistent inequities in how health care access and services are rationed, and populations whose health care needs are sometimes overlooked, such as the homeless and people with disabilities. Creative partnerships also were raised, such as closer relationships between employers and local community clinics that serve many uninsured workers.

These and other health care reform topics will be the focus of future forums for several years to come. HIP's members are realistic about how much "bootstrapping" we can accomplish as a small county. Still, our chances of success are greater if we can build on the community-wide engagement evidenced at the May Forum. Stay tuned for the next wave of local bootstrap initiatives.

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