

Health care reform argued at Town Hall

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PRESCOTT - All Arizonans should have access to health care and private insurers should be required to provide coverage to even the highest-risk groups of patients, a panel of community leaders recommended Wednesday.

With about 18 percent of Arizona residents lacking basic health insurance and spiraling medical costs threatening to leave even more uninsured, Arizona must join the ranks of states exploring ways to make sure all residents have access to health care, panel members said.

Other recommendations from the 90th Arizona Town Hall session this week include stressing the importance of behavioral health and streamlining licensing requirements to attract and keep physicians.

Arizona Town Hall is a twice-a-year community forum that brings together people from a variety of backgrounds across the state to debate problems and public policy issues. More than 130 elected leaders, health care workers, lawyers, business interests and others gathered at Prescott Resort this week for Town Hall's four-day session, "Health Care in Arizona: Accessibility, Affordability and Accountability."

Past forums organized by the non-profit Town Hall have dealt with growth, downtown redevelopment, water and biotechnology. Town Hall reports have shaped debate at the state Legislature and have been used by private interests. But organizers said the purpose is to spur debate and consensus on thorny public policy issues.

This session's most pressing debate was how to ensure all Arizonans have access to basic medical care.

"I think our meeting falls short if we don't offer the chance for universal coverage," said Loring Green, retired finance worker and board member of Carondelet Foundation in Tucson.

Green advocated a model of universal health coverage loosely based on Arizona's Health Care Cost Containment System, which combines federal and state dollars to provide coverage. He said such a shift is needed because the existing system, which relies on private companies to provide insurance, does not work for smaller firms and their employees.

"There are technical, financial and major issues to be resolved. These are tough questions," Green said.

Town Hall members said the four-day forum showed the complexity of the debate over health care reform.

"It forces you to listen to other people's point of view," said Anne McNamara, dean of the College of Nursing at Grand Canyon University. "I will take this information and use it in my job."

The Town Hall debate at times was sharply divided. Participants narrowly approved a recommendation that insurance companies should be required to provide coverage to all classes of patients.

"The insurance companies would be gone," said Lyman Edwards, a human resources executive with Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc., which last month completed acquisition of Phoenix-based Phelps Dodge Corp.

Other recommendations included:

- Better use of health information technology, including electronic medical records.
- Streamlining licensing requirements for physicians and spending more on the education of health care workers with the goal of meeting or exceeding national levels.
- Ensuring that behavioral health care is a priority and coordinating it with physical health care for treatment and coverage.
- Providing public education and incentives to encourage children and adults to live a healthful lifestyle.
- Stressing personal accountability for one's own health and care.
- Increasing outreach to children who are eligible for KidsCare, Arizona's health insurance for children 18 and younger.
- Developing a model patient-centered care, which would include patient advocates.
- Exploring tort reform and other ways to protect physicians from frivolous lawsuits.