

Table set for health debate

Editorial

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Arizona Town Hall just shifted the debate on health care in Arizona in a significant way. In what might be described as one of the more interesting and surprising sessions in its five-decade history, 136 diverse Arizonans concluded that health care could no longer be regarded as a personal commodity, but as public infrastructure - a crucial element of a well-functioning society, and part of a social contract among all residents.

The members did not endorse a single-payer government health care model, but did say Arizona should seek ways to ensure "universal coverage" for all residents.

"Almost one in five people in Arizona lack health care coverage," the final report said. "We must do better." Without offering specifics, the members suggested a public-private partnership could model itself on the state's well-regarded Health Care Cost Containment System for the poor.

Because of its history as a cautious civic association, not a cauldron of radical ideas, the Town Hall recommendations deserve serious review and discussion. Health care is shaping up to become a major national conversation in the 2008 presidential election, and Town Hall has helped set the table in Arizona.

The Town Hall emphasis has been on substantive debate and consensus on issues affecting the state. Town Halls have, for example, laid the foundation for meaningful legislative action on water, transportation and criminal-justice issues.

Health care accessibility, affordability and accountability now appear on the verge of significant re-examination.

The Town Hall report, which can be read at www.aztownhall.org, proposes to build on the momentum that Maine, Massachusetts and California have created with bold health care reforms.

We appreciate the contribution of Town Hall participants and look forward to greater dialogue on their health care ideas as well as other solutions.