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News

June 29, 2009

Forum focuses on health care reform

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-- Kanawha Valley residents interested in health care should talk to their representatives in Congress, organizers said at a public forum on healthcare Monday night.

Sen. Dan Foster, D-Kanawha, issued the call to action at a meeting at Congregation B'Nai Israel in Charleston. Others joined him.

"We need to be writing. We need to be calling," said Rachel Dash, a Charleston therapist and a member of the congregation's Temple Israel Social Action Committee. "We need to be insisting on justice."

Foster, a physician, joined with policy analyst Renate Pore and others to discuss the debate about national health-care reform, which is set to heat up in Washington, D.C., in the coming months.

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Foster said many health experts, politicians and

others believe that pressure needs to be relieved on private employers who subsidize health insurance costs while hospitals and their staff should be more accountable for the quality of healthcare.

Many also agree that the economy will not improve in the long-term if

health-care issues are not controlled, he said.

"U.S. health-care costs are the highest in the world," Foster said. "Something's gone awry and our system is dysfunctional and it's fragmented."

For instance, he said, not all medical technology devices provide the patient with a necessary procedure. "We need to determine, in a scientific way: What works?"

Countries with more successful health-care systems do better to prevent chronic diseases and other health problems, Foster said.

He said several countries have successful public-private collaborations, while the single-payer solution in Great Britain and Canada features a single, taxpayer-backed national health insurance agency.

Foster cited Massachusetts' recent health-care reform as being a successful example of offering almost universal coverage to state citizens.

Hedda Haning, a retired anesthesiologist, said Massachusetts has a slew of problems with its reformed health insurance program, such as limited access to care for many patients. She favors single-payer healthcare and hopes Congress does not use Massachusetts as a model.

Haning shared a paper published in February by professors at Harvard Medical School, who said low-income Massachusetts residents now face co-payments, deductibles and premiums that keep them from getting care they received before the reforms.

"I have a hard time understanding why you're so cheery," Haning said to Foster.

Foster admitted that Massachusetts does have problems with its new system, but said the state has covered more people.

"If we don't do something it's going to cost much, much more," Foster said. "The status quo is unacceptable."






U.S. Sen. Jay Rockefeller also sent a video message to the group, and said he supports the option of a new public health care plan in addition to allowing Americans to keep their current health insurance if they want to.

That would guarantee coverage for those who want it and drive down private health-care costs, he said.

"To me, the greatest imperative is that we have a system that covers everyone," said Pore, president of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care and a policy analyst with the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

"I believe this is the year it's going to happen."

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