

Affordable care is focus of three health meetings

By Jane Erikson

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Health care that's affordable and available to all is the idea behind three events this week, all free and open to the public.

The first, Thursday morning, is a forum of the Citizens Healthcare Working Group, a nationwide project that seeks public input on ways to improve the nation's health-care system.

The other two events, on Thursday and Saturday afternoons, will help people who cannot afford regular health insurance find alternative coverage that meets their needs.

The United States spends more on health care than any other industrialized country, numerous studies have confirmed. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 46 million Americans have no health-care coverage, including close to 1 million Arizonans.

The Citizens Health Care Working Group was created by the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 to gather public recommendations on how to improve America's health-care system.

That input, gathered at forums being held in cities around the country, will be turned into an "action plan" for consideration by Congress and the White House.

The Working Group asks participants to answer questions about the types of health-care services that should be available to all Americans and how to pay for those services.

"Our whole health-care system is in crisis," said Maricela Solis De Kester of Carondelet Health Network, which is hosting the Working Group forum Thursday. "The reality is, we have to have health-care reform."

Carondelet has invited about 800 health-care executives, business and government leaders, chambers of commerce representatives and legislators to the forum, but the Working Group also wants comment from the general public, Solis De Kester said.

Those who participate in Thursday's forum will be able to review a draft of the final report before it is sent to federal officials, she said.

"This is one time when people can have a voice and they should use it," Solis De Kester said.

The El Rio Health Fair Thursday afternoon and the Cover the Uninsured Health Fair on Saturday will offer people the chance to apply for health-care coverage through a number of different programs that offer free or low-cost care. They include the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System, KidsCare and Pima Community Access Program.

"We need to continue to address the uninsured in Arizona," said Michal Goforth of the Pima Community Access Program, one of the sponsors of the Saturday fair at Tucson Mall. "We need to figure out how to fix the system, but it's a complicated issue, and it's a state issue and a federal issue."

Other sponsors of the health fair are Carondelet Health Network, ScriptSave, the Southern Arizona Association of Health Underwriters, Cox Communications, and University Physicians Healthcare's Healthcare

IF YOU GO:

- These events are free and open to the public.

| Citizens Healthcare Working Group 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Thursday, Westin La Paloma Resort and Spa, 3800 E. Sunrise Drive

| El Rio Health Fair 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Thursday, El Rio Health Center, 839 W. Congress St.

| Cover the Uninsured Health Fair 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Tucson Mall Center Court

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