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Health care concerns aired

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How do you change a health care system that affects millions of people, costs billions of dollars and appears to be slowly self-destructing?

Congress doesn't know, so lawmakers decided to ask you.

Yes, you -- the average American citizen who pays for and uses health services.

"The day-to-day workings of health care can be best told by the people accessing the system day in and day out," said Yellowstone County Commissioner Bill Kennedy.

Kennedy and about 100 other people gathered in Billings on Friday to voice their concerns about the nation's health care system to the Citizens' Health Care Working Group, a panel appointed by the government to find out what Americans think about health care.

The panel selected Billings as one of 35 cities around the nation in which to hold public forums. Other Americans can voice their opinions on the group's Web site, www.citizenshealthcare.gov.

"Frankly, this is a real opportunity for Montanans," said Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., who asked the panel to come to Montana.

Baucus said pressure building nationwide will force the government to change the health care system.

"We're going to be forced to act," he said. "I'm going to make sure at (congressional) hearings that what comes out of here is going to be utilized."

Information gathered at the 35 community forums and online will be presented to the government in September, and Congress is expected to hold hearings on the matter sometime thereafter.

"We really want to hear from citizens all over the country," said Catherine McLaughlin, a Citizens' Health Care Working Group member from Michigan who attended the Billings meeting. "Senators and congressmen and -women have lots of views on all of this, and we've heard all of them. What we haven't heard is from citizens."

People at the Billings gathering discussed the same questions that were presented elsewhere -- what health care benefits or services should be available to Americans, how those benefits and services should be delivered, how they should be paid for, and what individuals are willing to give up to make the system work.

Participants agreed that health care should be accessible to all Americans regardless of their ability to pay for it. That is not the case now.

"If you can't afford it, you don't have it," Ralph Brewington said. "If people can't afford it, what in the world good is it?"

"At this point in my life, I'm getting nervous about not working anymore," said Aletha Seidel. "I don't know if I can afford insurance. I won't be in this job long enough to retire with full benefits."

People also said the quality of health care should be the same for any person accessing services anywhere in the nation.

Those and other results from the four-hour forum will eventually be posted on the Citizens' Health Care Working Group Web site.

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