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Universal health care suggested

Group urges making at least basic care available to all

By Lois M. Collins

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A national working group tasked with suggesting changes to America's health care system released interim recommendations Friday that include making at least basic medical, mental health and dental care available to all Americans.

In suggesting a form of universal care, the report notes that "The health care system that captures vast amounts of America's resources, employs many of its most talented citizens and promises to relieve the burdens of dread disease badly needs to be fixed. Health care costs strain individual, household, employer and public budgets."

The health-care system, the report says, is "unintelligible to most people."

Public comment taken from Utah was singled out in the preamble. "People in Utah recently spoke for tens of millions of Americans when they noted '(the) inability to navigate the health care system without luck, a relationship, money and perseverance.' "

The interim report has six recommendations:

- Public policy that all Americans have affordable health care. The working group found large majorities "willing to make additional financial investments in the service of expanding the protection against the costs of illness and the expansion of access to quality health care."
- A core benefits package for all Americans. Those benefits would be selected "through an independent, fair, transparent and scientific process which gives priority to the consumer-healthcare provider relationship." Additional coverage for services beyond the core package could be purchased.
- Guaranteed financial protection against very high health-care costs.
- Development of integrated community health networks.
- More intensive efforts to improve quality and efficiency. At the heart would be "integrated health care systems built around evidence-based best practices," reduction in fraud and waste and use of technology to save money and improve efficiency.
- New ways to provide and finance palliative care, hospice and other services, so that people living with advanced incurable conditions have access to services in the environment they choose.

The public has until Aug. 31 to comment on the report, prepared by The Citizens' Health Care Working Group, before it finalizes recommendations and sends them to the president and Congress. Under the law that created the group, five Congressional committees are to hold hearings on the final recommendations.

The draft recommendations were based on input from more than 20,000 Americans who participated in more than 75 community meetings, a small series of panel hearings that included a stop in Salt Lake City and

through an online survey.

The working group was created by the Medicare Prescription Drug, Improvement and Modernization Act of 2003 and includes 14 individuals from a broad range of backgrounds, including Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt. But the panel's final report will be submitted to Leavitt, so he did not take part in the discussion or formation of the recommendations, the report says. Utah Dr. Brent James of Intermountain Healthcare was a member of the working group.

Comments on the recommendations can be submitted online at www.citizenshealthcare.gov (where the full report is also available); by e-mail to citizenshealth@ahrq.gov or mailed to Citizens' Health Care Working Group, Interim Recommendations, 7201 Wisconsin Ave., Room 575, Bethesda, MD 20814.

► **Working group told to address questions**

The Citizens' Health Care Working Group was assigned by Congress to address at least these four questions:

- What health-care benefits and services should be provided?
- How does the American public want health care delivered?
- How should health-care coverage be financed?
- What trade-offs are the American public willing to make in either benefits or financing to ensure access to affordable, high-quality health-care coverage and services?

The group's initial recommendations are online at www.citizenshealthcare.gov.

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