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Health care reform under different lens

National project to visit city to ask public for views

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Since January, the federal government has been holding community meetings throughout the country to get people's views on how to make the health care system work better.

Advertisement There is no shortage of opinions on that. Nor is the nearly \$2 trillion a year that the United States spends on health care easily overlooked. And skeptics are likely to wonder why the government needs to spend \$5.5 million to gather more input on the problems facing the U.S. health care system.

But the Citizens' Health Care Working Group was created to get the views of people who don't work for policy research organizations.

The project, now winding down, comes to Milwaukee today. It will hold its last formal meeting from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. at the Italian Community Center, 631 E. Chicago St. About 40 people registered to participate in the discussion.

Turnout at the meetings has ranged from several dozen to several hundred people. In addition, more than 20,000 people submitted their ideas through an online survey.

The Milwaukee meeting is to discuss the Citizens' Health Care Working Group's interim recommendations.

The six recommendations include supporting efforts to improve quality and efficiency as well as restructuring end-of-life care - recommendations that have been made once or twice before.

"I can't say they are totally new," said Connie Smith, a spokeswoman for the Citizens' Health Care Working Group.

So far, the meetings have made clear that people think everyone should have some form of basic health care coverage.

"That's a pretty broad sentiment out there," said George Grob, executive director of Citizens' Health Care Working Group.

How that will be paid for is a question. Grob said the project has found that people are willing to pay more in taxes to expand health care coverage.

The community meetings also have made clear that people who have health insurance worry about health care costs and losing their coverage. They also have found that people think the health care system is in need of significant reform.

That isn't exactly news. But Grob said one of the goals is to frame the issue by providing background and options.

For instance, the Citizens' Health Care Working Group's Web site includes a brief, informative primer - The Health Report to the American People - on some of the key issues facing the health care system.

The interim recommendations also try to frame the issues by providing background.

Whether anything comes from all this is anybody's guess.

The deadline for online comments is Aug. 31. The health care group then must file a report with Congress. And by law, five congressional committees are required to hold public hearings on the report.

At a minimum, the project will tell policy-makers what thousands of people had to say about reforming health care, said Paul Westrick, vice president of external and government relations for Columbia St. Mary's.

Ascension Health Care, the parent of Columbia St. Mary's, has been involved in the project.

Westrick didn't make any predictions on what will come of the project. But he said, "It's a starting point."

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