



Health debate comes to S.A.

Web Posted: 04/18/2006 12:00 AM CDT

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On Wednesday, Texans will have a chance to sound off to President Bush and Congress on the issue of affordable health insurance and the crisis of the uninsured.

The public meeting in San Antonio is the only Texas stop of the Citizens' Health Care Working Group created by Congress as part of the Medicare Modernization Act.

The 14-member panel will report citizen input from the San Antonio meeting and others around the country to Bush and Congress in June. The idea is to frame the debate by lawmakers over the issue of universal health care.

The April 19 meeting is from 5:30-8:30 p.m. at the San Fernando Cathedral AT&T Community Center.

Rosario "Rosie" Perez, a San Antonio member of the appointed committee, said she hopes to see the maximum capacity of 500 people show up for the event. Only about 100 had registered by Monday afternoon.

The forum provides "platforms for a nationwide public debate about improving the nation's health care system to provide every American with the ability to obtain quality, affordable health care coverage," said Perez, vice president for mission integration and outreach for the three-hospital Christus Santa Rosa Health Care Corp.

The moderated round-table discussion and citizen input will address four key questions about what to expect from a national health care solution:

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 insurance and services?

Massachusetts stirred controversy earlier this month with a new law requiring state residents to have some form of public or employee-sponsored health insurance. Businesses that don't

provide insurance for workers will have to pay an annual fee per employee to a state fund for defraying the cost of insurance.

Perez said people calling for universal health coverage claim there is no political will in Congress to fix the woes of health care, while Congressional leaders say they aren't hearing that a federal government solution is needed.

She said the hearings around the country are bringing to light an interest, even in communities considered conservative, for a national solution.

Perez, the only Hispanic member of the panel, said she has been disappointed in the turnout of Hispanic residents of cities such as Los Angeles and Phoenix. At a recent meeting in Los Angeles, only about 20 percent of the participants were Hispanic in a county where they make up nearly half the population.

She said a good turnout in San Antonio would be an antidote to the lack of Hispanic voices in the discussion.

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