

Carroll County Times

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Residents lobby for universal health care

By Erica Kritt, Times Staff Writer

ANNAPOLIS — Standing in front of the State House, members of Progressive Maryland, The Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative and many other unions and organizations came together to champion the need for health insurance for all Americans.

The group chanted for the next president and Congress to pass legislation that will guarantee quality, affordable health care for all citizens in 2009.

The group has not proposed any legislation but is asking people and politicians to support a series of principles that include everyone getting the choice of health insurance plans, whether private, public or staying with a current plan. One of the principles states that government will set and enforce rules

on insurance company practices and charges.

The people and groups are a part of a new campaign called Health Care for America Now.

"We are looking at laws and a system that is inadequate to protect residents in Maryland and across the nation," said Elbridge James, president of Progressive Maryland.

Progressive Maryland is a grass-roots organization that seeks to improve the lives of working families in the state.

While James and others marked the launch of the Health Care for America Now campaign Tuesday morning, they advocated for people to contact their local and state legislators to impress the importance of affordable quality health care.

In Carroll County, there are roughly 18,000 uninsured people, said Tammy Black, executive director of Access Carroll, a facility that provides free health care to the county's uninsured, low-income residents.

Black said that number doesn't include undocumented residents living in the county.

Access Carroll has more than 2,100 clients and continues to grow, according to Black, accepting about 50 new clients a month.

Having every American covered by insurance is no small task, Black said.

"It won't be an easy or cheap endeavor, it's a big problem," she said. "I don't know what the best solution is."

Del. Donald Elliott, R-District 4B, who serves on the House of Delegates' Health Government Operations Committee, said he is unsure what will be done nationally. He said the legislature is taking steps to improve health-care access in Maryland.

Elliott said the state allows people to be covered on their parents' insurance plans up to age 25 if they are listed as a dependent. Before that bill went into effect in 2007, children who were full-time students could be covered up to age 23. If the child was not a full-time student coverage would end at the age of 19.

"It's these incremental steps we're doing as we can afford to do it," Elliott said.

In the coming years, Elliott hopes to keep taking steps to get more Marylanders insured. He said the committee is looking at requiring people who make a certain amount of money a year to have insurance or be penalized. He also said there is work being done to make health insurance policies more affordable.

"We're looking closely at the personal responsibility peace," he said.

Vincent DeMarco, president of the Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative, said that while progress is being made on getting all of America's citizens insured, Maryland is progressing on their own.

"We're very excited about the things going on in our state," he said.

DeMarco said his organization has a plan to insure all Marylanders that he is going to be announced later in the year.

In Maryland

During the legislature's special session in 2007, a law was passed to increase Medicaid eligibility to parents and caretaker relatives with incomes up to 116 percent of federal poverty guidelines, which works out to approximately \$25,000 for a family of four, according to The Maryland Citizens' Health Initiative.

Eventually, those Medicaid benefits will expand to cover childless adults with a household income of up to 116 percent of federal poverty guidelines, according to the Working Families and Small Business Health Care Coverage Act of 2007.

Over time, these bills and other legislative initiatives will cover 100,000 more Marylanders, said Del. Donald Elliott, R-District 4B, but there are almost 800,000 Marylanders without health insurance.

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