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Consultant looks to improve local health care

By Dale Rodebaugh

Herald Staff Writer

Like a swimmer dipping a toe to test the water, consultant Julie Thompson is getting an idea of what a plunge into providing primary health care will entail in La Plata County.

"I've talked to 80 to 85 people, but I'm certainly not done," Thompson said Tuesday, two months into an 18-month contract. "Input from the community is part of the project and will help determine what recommendations I make to the Community Health Advisory Council."

Thompson, a veteran healthcare manager in Wisconsin, was hired at the end of March to devise a strategic plan to replace services provided by Alamosa-based Valley-Wide Health Systems. The agency closed its office in La Plata County in March 2007. The departure left thousands of patients with no place to turn.

In what was expected to be an interim solution, Mercy Regional Medical Center, La Plata County and the city of Durango opened a stopgap clinic in what was the old Mercy Medical Center on East Third Avenue. Now, two years later – and counting – the same situation prevails.

La Plata County seems to be in pretty good shape for primary care vis-à-vis other areas, Thompson said. But problems arise for people who are uninsured or whose deductible is prohibitive. Employers who offer a health-maintenance program often face the same dilemma.

"There seem to be two main issues – access to health care and the cost of health care," Thompson said in a sit-down interview. "It depends basically on what an individual is living with."

"In La Plata County, the stereotypical uninsured person is not in low socioeconomic brackets but also is found among working people who pay for their own insurance and have high deductibles. They may forgo seeing a doctor because a high deductible means the cost comes out of their pocket."

In coming months, Thompson intends to explore:

- The use of case-management nurses, who act as a liaison between physicians and insurance companies or state or county health-care providers. All parties enjoy better service and lower costs because the nurses are familiar with patients.

- A bigger role for physician assistants and nurse practitioners in primary health care. In Colorado, nurse practitioners can practice independently, while in Wisconsin, they and physician assistants must work under the direct supervision of a physician, she said.

- Tele-medicine, which connects patients in remote areas in real time with experts via the Internet. In Wisconsin, two Native American tribes used the technology to save patients hours of driving in some cases, she said.

- Creative programs in Mesa and Weld counties. A case in point: A clinic in Mesa County, supported by churches, sees only uninsured patients.

- A tax-supported health-service district, a measure that was soundly rebuffed by voters in 2006. Such a district would be a last resort, Thompson said. "No one wants their taxes to go up," she said.

- Survey county residents to ask if they're insured, if their policy has deductibles and if they forgo consulting a doctor because of the cost.

The strategic plan Thompson plans to present will assess current strengths and weaknesses in health-care delivery, look at ways to ensure that there are enough primary-care providers because fewer medical school students are opting for family practice, how to resolve the crisis for uninsured residents and how to help employers who want to offer health insurance and can't afford it.

Thompson worked in Minocqua, Wis., for the Marshfield Clinic, one of the largest physician-owned practices in the nation. Marshfield has 800 physicians at 43 locations in a halfdozen counties. Thompson has experience with reimbursement associated with government-paid care; coordination of services with Native American tribes; electronic medical records, integration of physical, mental and dental care; recruitment and retention of health-care providers; and tele-medicine.

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For more information

Anyone who wants to weigh in on solving health-care needs in La Plata County may visit www.chaclaplata.org for specific issues. Consultant Julie Thompson is available to address broader issues at [healthac
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