

Durangoans voice their support for single-payer care

Forum provides input for Obama transition team

By Katie Burford

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President-elect Barack Obama asked for the opinions of communities around the nation on health care, and La Plata County is giving them to him.

On Monday, about 50 people packed the Anasazi Room of the County Courthouse to share their thoughts about what is wrong with the current health-care system and how to fix it.

A report of the meeting, which was hosted by the county and the League of Women Voters, will be uploaded to a Web site for Obama's transition team, change.gov.

Participants in the meeting showed near unanimous support for a single-payer system, in which all providers are paid from a single fund that could be administered by the government.

The group also largely agreed that the current system, where most people get their insurance through their employers, should go.

"When you lose your job, you lose your health-care coverage," said Ellen Parks, past president for the league.

She said the high cost of providing insurance puts U.S. businesses at a competitive disadvantage to those in countries whose governments provide care.

Obama has selected Tom Daschle, a former U.S. senator and author of *Critical: What We Can Do About the Health-Care Crisis*, to be his secretary of health and human services and lead the reform effort.

Obama made expanding health-care coverage a recurrent promise of his campaign. He does not propose ending employer-based coverage but has proposed offering everyone the option of enrolling in the plan currently provided to employees of the federal government.

The transition Web site asks communities to identify the biggest problem with the system.

Among the answers given Monday included:

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- * High deductibles and co-pays.
- * A lack of primary-care physicians.
- * Plans not being portable.
- * Nonintegrated care.
- * An emphasis on sickness rather than wellness.
- * Denial of coverage for pre-existing conditions.
- * Administrative inefficiencies.

Materials provided by the transition team for the meetings stated that the number of people in this country without insurance is 45 million and growing as the number of unemployed increases in the midst of a national recession. Richard Grossman, a local obstetrician gynecologist, noted that the audience was mostly older and white – a population that is fairing better than others under the current system.

“The wrong people are represented here,” he said.

Later, he suggested levying a sin tax on not just cigarettes and alcohol but unhealthful foods, such as sugary sodas and greasy burgers, to discourage their consumption.

Assistant County Manager Joanne Spina, who moderated the meeting, said the report to the transition team could reflect diverse, even contradictory positions.

“This is not intended to be a consensus view,” she said.

Durango Mayor Renee Parsons said any real change will take serious commitment from the top.

“The biggest problem we have had is the lack of political will by the federal government,” she said.

The last nationwide effort at health-care reform was in the early '90s. Hillary Clinton's leadership of that failed endeavor proved an albatross to her presidential campaign earlier this year. Obama hopes to avoid the pitfalls of that attempt by building consensus early on.

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