

Health care solutions can happen with public involvement

By Chellie Smietana

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Last week a report was released demonstrating that over the last six years wages in Oregon have increased by 14 percent, while health care premiums increased a disproportionate 80 percent.

This means more families and businesses will be forced to drop health insurance they are unable to afford.

We know. We've been watching access to health care services erode significantly. But now citizens of Eastern Oregon are working to resolve these problems.

The Northeast Oregon Network (NEON) is a community health collaborative comprised of a group of concerned local citizens who are pooling their time and resources to solve health care access problems in Wallowa, Baker and Union counties.

NEON's mission is to provide greater access to health care services for the uninsured and the underinsured.

This objective won't be reached overnight, but NEON has begun to work towards it. Our first effort focuses on uninsured children and families who are at 185 percent of the federal poverty level, or \$37,000 for a family of four.

Nearly four out of every 10 people in this tri-county region are at or below this income level, as compared to three out of 10 in the rest of Oregon.

Additionally, nearly one in four people in the region have no health insurance, compared with less than one in five people in Oregon as a whole.

From 1995 to 2003, uncompensated care at hospitals in Umatilla, Union, Baker and Wallowa counties has increased an average of \$61,832 per hospital each year, an increase that adds up to \$2.47 million dollars of health care services that the citizens of northeast Oregon needed, but could not afford.

Residents from the northeast corner of Oregon encounter significant challenges accessing quality and affordable health care services when they need them.

NEON believes it is possible to make headway and address these critical issues. To begin, we are working with Covering Kids and Families to actively enroll people into programs for which they are eligible.

In addition, NEON is working with Oregon Dental Service School of Dental Hygiene to improve the oral health of residents of Eastern Oregon because we know that poor oral health leads to poor overall health. NEON is also making tools available that will assist people to become better health care consumers.

The high cost of fuel, lack of public transportation, long distances to doctors offices, and mountain passes coupled with bad weather have made transportation a barrier to health care in the region.

NEON has begun to provide rides for patients to get to needed care; soon we will have access to a mobile van, made available by with Oregon Dental School, that will bring dental and health care services to more remote communities where people live.

Most of all, we are demonstrating that it is possible to work collaboratively to solve health care problems. Our collaboration is two years old. Our network includes members from public health, mental health, alcohol and drug treatment agencies; three critical access hospitals; the Commission on Children and Families, Covering Kids and Families,; the Oregon Health Sciences University School of Nursing (OHSU); Oregon Dental School ; Baker County Health Improvement Project; the Pacific Source Foundation; the Northwest Health Foundation; local Lions clubs and other health-care providers and business community members.

We are not alone.

Many groups are working on health care reform in Oregon. One Web site lists most of those groups: www.oregonhealthreform.org. This means there are many ways for us to get involved. These health care costs and inefficiencies hurt us all. One group, CodeBlueNow! (www.codebluenow.org) has an online survey tool so we can learn what you need and want in a new health care system.

Gov. Ted Kulongoski is asking for recommendations. It is time all voices are heard.

Health care is not so big and complicated that we can't fix it. We know that by working collaboratively and having our voices heard we can make a difference. Get involved today and take action as if your health depended on it. Because it does.

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