



Put health reform in the state budget now

By VITO GRASSO

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For the first time in a generation, a bold initiative to begin the process of mending New York's severely damaged primary health care system is on the table. The state Legislature must support these efforts and begin investing more of our health care dollars in primary care as proposed.

While legislators may debate many elements of the 2008-09 executive budget, two essential primary care elements must be adopted. First, we need to improve reimbursement for primary and preventive care. Second, we need to attract more physicians to primary care and assure increased patient access to primary care services.

For too long, New York has buckled under the weight of a costly system where primary health care is undervalued and underdeveloped. The result is that people end up in high-cost, acute-care institutional settings for conditions that might have been prevented or managed with primary care. New York ranks 39th out of the 50 states in "avoidable use and costs," according to the Commonwealth Fund Scorecard on U.S. Health System Performance. What this means is that we waste a fortune on avoidable costs.

The administration's proposals place reimbursement on a path that will address the historic underpayment for primary care providers. Financial instability of our provider community increasingly threatens the access and quality of care available to New Yorkers. Not only will hospital outpatient departments and community-based providers receive increases, but private practitioners will receive fee increases raising their rates to 75 percent of the Medicare over the next two years.

In many communities, primary care physicians can barely make a living -- a situation that has dissuaded medical students from choosing careers in primary care and forced many primary care physicians to seek work outside of primary medicine.

The budget's "Doctors Across New York" program would address the growing shortage of primary care physicians by providing loan repayment for primary and specialty care physicians willing to practice in underserved areas. The program will fund up to 100 awards each year with a maximum of \$150,000 in repayment over five years, provide support for starting new practices in these areas, and foster residency training in community-based sites, including private practices.

How do we know these reforms can't wait? Because experts have analyzed our health care system for years. Study after study and report after report have found that bolstering primary care services leads to three very important results: lower costs, improved health outcomes, and reduced health disparities. Very few experts, if any, debate this.

Delay by the Legislature will exacerbate an already precarious situation. Last year, Hudson Headwaters Health Network nearly collapsed, which would have left thousands of North Country residents without access to health care services. The North Country continues to hemorrhage doctors and without a permanent solution, Hudson Headwaters and other North Country providers will be tottering on the edge of insolvency and understaffing again.

Unless we implement these three crucial reforms in this budget session, we risk crippling our primary care system, leaving patients no choice but to crowd our emergency rooms or allow chronic conditions to worsen, only leading to even higher health care costs for our state and a much unhealthier population. The time to act is now.

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