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Another Voice / Medical care

Albany must repair state's broken health system

By Elizabeth Swain

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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 2008-2009 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.

For too long, New York has buckled under the weight of a costly system that undervalues primary health care. The result is that people end up in high-cost, acute-care settings for conditions that might have been prevented or managed with primary care.

New York ranks 39th 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 executive budget places reimbursement on a pathway to address the historic underpayment for primary care. Not only will hospital outpatient departments and community-based providers receive increases, but private practitioners will receive fee increases.

Meanwhile, primary care physicians can barely make a living in many communities — a situation that has dissuaded medical students from choosing careers in primary care. The budget's "Doctors Across New York" program would address this problem by providing loan repayment for primary and specialty care physicians willing to practice in underserved areas.



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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.

Experts have analyzed our health care system for years. Study after study has found that bolstering primary care services lowers costs, improves health outcomes and reduces health disparities.

Delay 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. 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 to crowd emergency rooms or allow chronic conditions to worsen, leading to even higher costs for our state and an unhealthier population. The time to act is now.

Elizabeth Swain is the CEO of the Community Health Care Association of New York State.

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