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Insurance providers on board with Adirondack Regional Medical Home

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LAKE GEORGE — Six health-insurance companies will take part in the Adirondack Regional Medical Home Pilot project, which aims to redesign North Country health care.

The historic agreement with regional hospitals and health-care centers brings higher reimbursement rates for primary-care service to help doctors better monitor patient progress.

Health-care officials, insurance companies and lawmakers rolled out the model plan Tuesday, one they consider a step toward statewide health-care reform.

With it comes \$3.2 million from the 2010 state budget, said State Health Commissioner Dr. Richard F. Daines, speaking to a full gallery in the Warren County Municipal Center.

"There is not another trial this large anywhere else in the country."

HOW IT WORKS

In exchange for higher insurance payments, participating primary-care physicians agree to coordinate prevention services and manage critical care. So, for example, they will follow cases after their patients are referred to testing, therapy or specialists.

Program organizers anticipate that will lead to a drop in high-cost emergency room and hospital visits over

the next five years.

The program also looks to expand health-care access and stabilize the pool of physicians, stemming an exodus of doctors from the rural North Country to more urban areas.

WHO'S IN

The big question with the plan was how health-insurance companies would buy into it.

Participating insurers are New York state, via its Medicaid and Civil Service programs; Empire Blue Cross; Capital District Physicians Health Plan Inc.; Fidelis Care; MVP Healthcare; and United Healthcare.

Those companies will contribute nearly \$45 million in the next eight to 10 years, said Dr. John Rugge, CEO of Hudson Headwaters Health Network, which operates a string of rural health-care centers.

Rugge established a framework for open communication between insurance companies and providers under antitrust protection laws to cultivate the agreement.

"There's nothing like desperation to bring providers together," he said Tuesday.

PRESSURE TO JOIN

"Two payers said we really believe in this, but we don't have the money to support it," Rugge said.

The two insurance companies not involved are Excellus and Blue Shield of Northeastern New York.

The Hudson Headwaters Board of Directors has voted unanimously to terminate any relationship with major regional insurers who do not join the Medical Home Pilot.

CVPH Medical Center President and CEO Stephens M. Mundy said prospects are for the program to grow.

"We've got the critical mass to start. We need everybody else to participate to make it thrive."

Insurance carriers with very few members in the Medical Home region have less at stake.

"No outside insurance company has more than 1 percent of the patient population," Rugge said. "Since there is no way for us to chase after every insurance company, they will be the beneficiaries of reform. The patients are going to get the benefit."

TECHNOLOGY CRUCIAL

Adirondack Medical Home providers will net \$14.3 million in HEAL 10 grant funds to advance information technology, a cornerstone of the pilot program.

Some of the funding will pay for computer systems and more staff in doctor's offices, so they can link to the network.

"E-prescription is a core requirement," Rugge said because that will allow physicians and hospitals to send and track prescriptions electronically.

120 DOCTORS

Starting in January 2010, Medical Home starts getting providers online.

Patients don't sign up for this; the onus is on doctors to enroll.

There are 1,700 patients per physician, with about 120 physicians already committed to the pilot program, Ruge said.

Mundy said doctors connected with CVPH Medical Center have responded favorably to the Medical Home model.

"Some are saying, 'it's about time,' some are in the middle, and others are saying, 'we've already done this,' to which we say, 'well, not really.'"

During the announcement, Plattsburgh/North Country Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Garry Douglas raised a devil in the details.

Much of the rural North Country/Adirondack region does not yet have broadband telecommunications infrastructure.

Funding is poised to start construction next year, he said.

"We need technology to make this health-care initiative work."

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