



Staten Island Advance

YOUR OPINION

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Gov. Eliot Spitzer and the state Legislature deserve praise for passing a budget that makes strides in moving New York's long-broken health care system from one that waits until people to get sick toward one that identifies and solves medical problems before people fall ill.

However, far more work must be done if primary and preventive care -- and the lower costs, better health outcomes and reduced health disparities that will result -- are to become the centerpiece of New York's health care reform.

This budget:

- Expanded eligibility in the Child Health Plus program and streamlined enrollment and recertification for Medicaid and Family Health Plus. Lack of insurance is a major barrier to primary and preventive care.
- Restored \$9.8 million in transition funding for community health centers.
- Restructured the Diagnostic and Treatment Center Indigent Care Pools in a way that results in a fairer distribution of these funds.

Still, there is a long way to go to reach the Commission on Healthcare Facilities' recommendation that "all New York residents have a primary care 'home.'"

In Staten Island, we have seen several primary care doctors leave practice early. Insurance company hassles, unreimbursed services and high malpractice premiums are forcing physicians to retire early or limit their practice. These conditions create significant access problems for patients and shift health care costs from low cost in-office services to high-cost emergency department services.

To remedy these problems, we call on the state to undertake these low-cost measures:

- Release the \$10-million Community Healthcare Association of New York State/Primary Care Development Corporation statewide CHC Capital Grant Program, which was passed in 2005 and funded in 2006;
- Set aside HEAL-NY grant funds for the explicit purpose of expanding primary care;
- Work with government and private payers to improve reimbursement for primary care services;
- Set aside some of the \$1.5 billion the state will receive from the Federal State Health Reform Partnership to assure that primary care providers have the information technology needed for preventing and managing chronic illness.

The steps outlined above will jump start primary care access throughout the state.

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