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Kansas Should Pursue Consumer-Driven Care

By Sarah McIntosh

Earlier this year, the Kansas Legislature assigned the Kansas Health Policy Authority to study different options for health care reform with the goal of providing its findings in time for next year's legislative session. In an effort to inform lawmakers, state officials, medical professionals and insurers of consumer-driven insurance reform options, the Flint Hills Center for Public Policy is co-hosting Legislative Academies on the Insured and Uninsured in Kansas with House Speaker Melvin Neufeld, R-Ingalls.

One academy was held Monday in Lawrence. Another will be held from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. today in Wichita; for more information, call 316-634-0218. In addition to Neufeld, speakers will include Medicaid expert Michael Bond; Richard Warner, past president of the Kansas Medical Society; and state Rep. Jeff Colyer, R-Overland Park.

Kansas is one of many states considering or enacting health care reforms. It is important for the authority and legislators to be well-informed on reform options, including what is being done in other states.

Maine's Dirigo Health program aims for universal health care by 2009. However, Maine has seen an increase in the number of uninsured. Its plan leads to adverse selection -- whereby the sickest and neediest individuals participate while the healthy find it too expensive to participate.

Massachusetts' well-known program, the Connector, mandates that all state residents have health care by this month. This universal plan, however, is already facing huge problems. The Connector's lowest price insurance plan's cost is much higher than anticipated, discouraging enrollment. Several identifiable aspects of the Connector are leading to discouraging results, such as the individual mandate, the employer mandate, poorly targeted subsidies and too many mandated benefits. Furthermore, the cost, projected to be \$1.3 billion for the first three years, has already reached \$1.7 billion for the first year.

Fortunately, there have been some successes in other states. South Carolina allows personal health accounts, which give beneficiaries the power to make more health care choices. And Missouri passed a law allowing small-business owners to make pretax contributions to employees' selected policies. The plan allows individuals to become the owners of their health care policies so that their policies are portable.

Florida's pilot program for reforming Medicaid has controlled Medicaid costs while offering beneficiaries the opportunity to choose the policies that best suit their needs.

Health insurance should not be one size fits all. Everyone has different needs and desires. Offering different plans at varying prices is integral to inducing people to self-insure.

The Kansas Health Policy Authority should consider all options for health reform, including studying reforms in other states. Legislators should look at the benefits of consumer-driven health care and allow individuals to have control over their own health insurance.

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