



Legislators, advocates rally for ‘Cover the Uninsured Week’

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By JIM BARON

PROVIDENCE — Marking national “Cover the Uninsured Week,” a group of liberal legislators and allied organizations stood in the cold rain outside the Statehouse Thursday to support efforts to expand RIte Care and other programs that provide health coverage for children and low income families.

Rhode Island’s unemployment rate is now 10.5 percent and climbing, according to the Department of Labor and Training, and for many people the loss of a job also means the loss of health coverage. According to the Health Care Organizing Project, the coalition that put together Thursday’s rally, more than 100,000 Rhode Islanders, almost one in every 10 residents, is without health care coverage.

For some, what coverage there is has been shrunk by budget cuts that reduce eligibility levels and require higher co-pays that are unaffordable for those with lower incomes.

“Especially in an economic crisis like this one, our state cannot wait to reduce our numbers of uninsured and improve the cost-efficiency of our health care system,” said Peter Asen, associate director of Ocean State Action and the informal M.C. for the event “This coalition will not rest until we have quality, affordable health care for every single Rhode Islander.”

In an interview after the rally, Asen said, “We are anticipating that people are going to say, how can we afford to improve health care” with a half-billion dollars of budget deficit affecting virtually every aspect of state government. “For one thing, some of these RIte Care changes are very cost-efficient for the state.

“The question is not can we afford to do it, it is can we afford not to do it,” Asen said.

Linda Katz, policy director for The Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College, pointed to a bill sponsored by Pawtucket Rep. Elaine Coderre in the House and President Teresa Paiva Weed in the Senate that would extend RIte Care coverage to children in families with incomes up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level, up from 250 percent.

Katz noted that the federal S-CHIP program will cover two-thirds of the cost of that insurance, so the state could insure an additional 2,500 children and pay only one-third of the cost. The legislation would also allow families over the 300 percent of poverty level to buy Rite Care at the full cost, so there would be no cost to the state.

“Rhode Island has the opportunity to use new federal dollars to provide Rite Care coverage to currently uninsured children,” Katz said. “These are federal funds that will continue beyond the economic stimulus, and will ensure that more children are able to access primary and preventive health care services so critical to their healthy development.”

Warwick Rep. Frank Ferri spoke on a bill he sponsored in the House, with a mirror version introduced in the Senate by Pawtucket Sen. John McBurney, that would repeal Rite Care increases imposed just last year on people with incomes between 133 and 150 percent of the federal poverty level.

“With the economic crisis in this state, so many of our neighbors are losing their jobs and their health care, threatening the health of our state and the strength of our overall health care system,” Ferri said. “Now is the time to take down barriers to coverage for people, not to put new barriers up.”

Bill Flynn, executive director of the Senior Agenda Coalition, called himself part of the “silver tsunami” of aging Baby Boomers who are going to be straining the Medicare and Medicaid programs.

“The good and the bad news is we are going to live a lot longer,” Flynn said, “and at the end of the day or at the end of a life, really is our safety net.

“Sixty may be the new 50,” he said, “but I guarantee you, 85 is not the new 55. All of us are going to need some kind of care if we live long enough.

“Increasing the capacity of the home- and community-based care system is absolutely essential to our goal of ‘rebalancing’ Medicaid long-term care spending to help seniors and disabled adults live in the community as long as possible,” Flynn said.

Providence Sen. Juan Pichardo told the two dozen or so activists who attended the rally about legislation he sponsored, along with Providence Rep. Joseph Almeida in the House, that would create a state Office of Health Equity to coordinate and monitor the state’s efforts to reduce health disparities among different racial, ethnic and class groups.

According to statistics from the Health Care Organizing project, compared with whites, black people in Rhode Island suffer higher death rates from heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Infant mortality for Latinos is 40 percent higher than for whites. “Families and children deserve quality health care and positive health outcomes whatever their income status and ethnic background,” Pichardo said.