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Health Care Reform Rolls; Local Links

By: Maggie Behringer

Health care reform in Connecticut took a considerable step forward last week when the General Assembly voted to overturn Gov. M. Jodi Rell's veto of the Sustinet Bill, which seeks comprehensive changes to the state's health care and insurance systems.

"The odds were against us," Juan A. Figueroa, president of the Universal Health Care Foundation, said on Wednesday. "I think it's remarkable and a testament to the involvement of so many people. There's no question there were a lot of elements that went into this win."

Region Played Role

Since last fall, the group healthcare4every1, the foundation's grassroots vehicle to promote Sustinet, hosted a statewide road show with stops in Torrington and Sharon. Those engaged in the campaign included small business owners, realtors, nurses, doctors, labor unions and community activists. In the Northwest Corner, Mr. Figueroa cited the invaluable help of organizations like the Sharon-based Foundation for Community Health.

'Political Will'

"We were excited to see [the bill] pass," said Nancy Heaton, executive director of the Sharon organization. "We worked very hard to be part of the process to ... make sure rural issues were addressed."

For the Universal Health Care Foundation's approach to reform and the Sustinet plan, Ms. Heaton had only praise. "I was very impressed by the thoughtfulness. They gave us a way to talk about healthcare reform. I don't think these problems are unsolvable. We just haven't had the political will to do that."

The governor vetoed the bill, HB-6600, on July 2 as part of a group of seven vetoes. On July 20, the House voted 105 to 35 to override the veto, while the Senate voted 24 to 12.

By today, members of the legislature and Ms. Rell are to appoint a nine-person board of directors to expand upon the framework in the bill by establishing specific goals and laying out a step by step implementation plan.

"Their charge is to put the Sustinet plan in place and come up with implementation planning," Mr. Figueroa said.

Connecticut Comptroller Nancy Wyman and state Health Care Advocate Kevin Lembo will lead the panel as co-chairs. The remaining seats will be filled by a nurse, a primary care physician, a union representative and experts in the fields of health technology, insurance economics, insurance underwriting and insurance and employee benefits.

A collection of committees and task forces, covering issues such as preventative health care, information technology, health care quality, obesity, tobacco use and the idea of a medical home for individuals, will report to the board of directors.

The end goal is to submit draft legislation to the General Assembly on Jan. 1, 2011 and began enrollment in Sustinet on July 1, 2012. This timeline represents concessions made to the state's financial situation.

Though informational literature has calculated that savings generated by Sustinet would equal \$1.7 billion for households and employers by 2014-or \$875 per person in premiums and out-of-pocket expenses,-as well as providing a \$2.60 return on every \$1 invested, the proposal required a \$950 million contribution by the state. Originally, enrollment was slated for January 1, 2011 with the system achieving full operational status in 2014.

"[The timetable] had to be extended because of the financial problems in the state," said Mr. Figueroa. He added, "The thrust of the solution is in the legislation that was passed."

That thrust addresses issues of cost and quality in the health care system and hinges on offering a public choice for insurance alongside existing private options. Sustinet uses a critical mass of participants, created by pairing an expanded pool of state employees with the enrollment of safety net programs, businesses, families and individuals. That mass will be joined with the state's purchasing power to stimulate competition. The system is more akin to President Barack Obama's health care reform than initiatives like Massachusetts' Commonwealth Health.

The ongoing health care debate and any developments in Washington, D.C., will certainly affect Connecticut's progress. Within 60 days of the enactment of any federal legislature, the Sustinet board of directors must offer its recommendations to the General Assembly.

"What happens at the federal level the board of directors would have to wrestle with," Mr. Figueroa said. "You want to couple Sustinet with whatever the feds do."

As to the future, specifically whether Sustinet can anticipate the same kind of support in the legislature in 2011, Mr. Figueroa said, "Our focus is with the board of directors."

However, he added that the tangible interest and investment in health care reform in the General Assembly and the state in general will only continue to grow over the next two years, holding the Board of Directors accountable for providing a quality draft in 2011. The foundation will also have a sense of the support running up to the deadline.

"There will be a lot of buy in by the folks that will be voting on it," Mr. Figueroa said. "There are a lot of people feeling good about getting this done, even if there's a long way to go."

