Panel Seeks Citizen Input on Health Care Reform

BY NELLIE BRISTOL
Contributing Writer

WASHINGTON — American health care could be in for the world's largest customer satisfaction survey as the U.S. Citizens' Health Care Working Group seeks comments nationwide on how to reform the system.

"In order to make health care work for all Americans, we need to hear from all Americans," said working group member Rosario Perez, a registered nurse and vice president of Mission Integration and Outreach Services for CHRISTUS Santa Rosa Health Care in San Antonio.

"We want to hear from individuals across the country. That means your parents, your relatives, your coworkers, and people in your community," she said. Perez spoke at a briefing sponsored by the Citizen's Health Care Working Group.

Established by the 2003 Medicare Modernization Act, the 14-member panel will collect as many comments and suggestions as possible before April 15.

Submissions will serve as the basis for panel recommendations for Congress and President Bush to consider next spring. The recommendations will address costs, care affordability, and quality improvement.

"Despite increases in medical care spending that are greater than the rate of inflation, population growth, and Gross Domestic Product growth, there has not been a commensurate improvement in our health status as a nation," according to the law that established the working group.

Among areas of interest highlighted by the working group are consumer concerns about health care delivery, benefits that should be provided, how health care should be paid for, and acceptable trade-offs to ensure broad access to health care services.

Comments will be collected via the group's Web site (www.citizenshealthcare.gov) and through "town hall"–style community meetings planned for every state.

The effort is the bipartisan brainchild of Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.).

'We want to hear from individuals across the country. That means your parents, your relatives, your coworkers, and people in your community.'

The press briefing was held in the same Senate room as the 1912 hearings on the sinking of the Titanic, and Sen. Wyden said the U.S. health care system could suffer a similar dire fate "if something dramatic isn't done to save it."

Sen. Wyden suggested citizen input may engender systemic change that has stymied Congress for the last 6 decades.

A "citizens' road map" for change could help "overcome the feeding frenzy by special interests," he argued.

The panel is made up of health care professionals, economists, benefits experts, and advocates from across the country, and includes Health and Human Services Secretary Michael Leavitt.

The group is chaired by Randall L. Johnson, head of corporate benefits for Motorola Inc.; vice chair is Catherine McLaughlin, Ph.D., a health economist at the University of Michigan.

To jump start the national discussion, the group developed a 30-page "Health Report to the American People," which summarizes the current state of U.S. health care.

"Having this information prepares us as a country to ask some tough questions about whether we are getting the services we need and want, [and] whether we are getting our money's worth and choices we need and are willing to make to have health [access] for all Americans," said Dr. McLaughlin.

She said that the working group aims to develop recommendations that would address health care as a whole.

"Our health care system is a lot like our natural environment, an ecosystem in which any significant change in one area has ripple effects throughout the others," she said.

"We need to address the entire health care system, not just specific problems like cost, quality, or access—no matter how urgent they may seem from our different perspectives," Ms. Perez said. ■