States Prescribe Varying Degrees of Health Reform

When Alan Weil talks about state health reform he always mentions the trilogy—Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont. As executive director for the National Academy for State Health Policy, he’s seen health reform initiatives that span the spectrum.

And a lot of it’s happening in the states, Weil said.

“It’s clear that the structure of the federal bill draws on state’s experience,” Weil said.

But the approaches are all different, even those in the trilogy, he said in a health policy workshop Thursday afternoon.

The Massachusetts health care reform plan, he said, tackled issues of coverage first, and will tackle cost later. Maine, on the other hand, is working on costs and coverage simultaneously, he said. In Vermont, the state started with chronic care management—there is a community-based organization designed to help people manage their chronic conditions, Weil said.

One example of an innovative approach is Washington Basic Health. The state-subsidized program provides low-cost health insurance coverage through private health plans. The 22-year-old program purchases health insurance for more than 500,000 low-income residents, according to Preston Cody, assistant administrator to the plan.

Washington Basic Health offers an important example, particularly because the national health reform plans includes an option for states to opt-in to a state-subsidized health care option, Cody said.

Washington is proof of how that works. In the 22 years of operation, the program has put people on waiting lists three times, including now, said Cody.

“But that’s where we are today with the economic situation,” he said. “The recession has created numerous challenges on our state budget.”

And with zero federal matching dollars, that meant the program had to take a more than 40 percent budget reduction this year, according to Cody. That translates to covering fewer low-income folks who need health insurance coverage.

Participants in the state-subsidized plan share the responsibility for paying for the low-cost coverage and pay on average $60 a month in premiums, Cody said.

“Without this program in the state a lot of people would simply choose to go without health insurance,” he said.

—Mikel Chavers

Justice Matters: Insights from the Bench
A Discussion of the Future of Fair and Impartial State Courts
Friday, Nov. 13 | 11 a.m.–12:30 p.m. | Flores Ballroom

Four state Supreme Court Justices will discuss the future of fair and impartial state courts during the Friday morning plenary session. The panel will be moderated by Bill Vickrey, administrative director of the California Administrative Office of the Courts. The panel consists of Wisconsin Chief Justice Shirley Abrahamson, Alabama Chief Justice Sue Bell Cobb, Oregon Chief Justice Paul De Muniz and Kentucky Chief Justice John D. Minton Jr.
Health Reform Comes with Challenges, Needs for States

The epicenter of the health care debate is in Washington, D.C., these days, but the ripple effects of any Congressional action are sure to affect states.

And state officials have several priorities for any kind of reform, said Alan Weil, executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy, an independent academy of state health policymakers.

He said leaders want to connect people with the services they need, bring better coordination and integration in the health care system, improve care for people with complex conditions, orient the health care system toward results and promote a more efficient health care system.

“States are struggling under the burdens of programs they already run,” he said. “The notion that they are now going to turn all their energy into this expansion … is, I think, unrealistic.”

Weil spoke at the health policy workshop, “Will Health Care Get a Facelift?” Thursday afternoon.

Weil said states have five needs in implementing reform. They’ll need to know what is in the legislation, if and when it passes. They need to support strategic and implementation planning, he said. In addition, states will need topic-specific technical assistance and will need to focus on communication, both internally and with the federal government.

“States will benefit if all these efforts are coordinated with what they’re doing now in terms of their own health agendas and some of the existing efforts,” he said.

And, said Jane Cline, West Virginia’s insurance commissioner, states will face challenges in dealing with the costs.

“States do not have an extra $600 billion lying around,” she said.

For insurance commissioners, the most important aspects of the bill would be the sweeping reforms to improve access and equity.

“Insurance market reforms promise to make health insurance fairer, more transparent and more available,” she said. But those reforms would come with a price, she said. 

—Mary Branham

Does U.S. Face Global Competitiveness Crisis?

The U.S. will soon be passed by numerous other countries in global competitiveness according to some educational and economic indices.

That may not necessarily be a bad thing, said the leader of one educational policy think tank.

“Is our goal to dominate the world?” asked Watson Scott Swail, executive director for Educational Policy Institute. “What we really want to do is get better than we were. I honestly don’t care if we’re first or fifth or 10th. I just want us to keep getting better.”

“We’ve entered what I call the higher education arms race,” Swail said during an education policy workshop Thursday. Specifically, he argued that the U.S. has an excessive number of colleges—4,000 two- and four-year postsecondary institutions. “I don’t think we need more. I think we need better,” he said.

Jamai Blivin, executive director of Innovate-Educate, an industry-led partnership responding to the nation’s decline in its global standing in science, technology, engineering and mathematics, also known as STEM education, expressed more alarm about the nation’s falling rankings in it. In 2006, Blivin said, U.S. 15-year-olds ranked 25th in the world in math, and 14th in the percentage of students to graduate from college. Just 11 years earlier, the U.S. was tied for first in college graduates, she said.

“Every year, 200,000 U.S. engineering jobs need to be filled, and every year only 60,000 U.S. engineers graduate, leaving more than two-thirds of these STEM positions vacant,” Blivin said.

She recommended various policy actions, including making STEM relevant to the community, ensuring STEM educators are able to teach STEM, defining a public-private STEM framework for participation by the private sector, and requiring learning portfolios from students.

“We believe that we are at a tipping point in education, and industry is convinced that they are part of the solution,” Blivin said.

—Tim Weldon

President and First Lady’s Luncheon

Make plans to attend a festive luncheon outside on the resort grounds honoring outgoing CSG President West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin and First Lady Gayle Manchin.

Friday, Nov. 13 | 12:30–2 p.m. | Main Lawn (behind hotel lobby)

President and First Lady’s Luncheon

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The many sessions at the CSG Annual Meeting in La Quinta covered topics ranging from health care to education to energy. A special half-day session focused on how states are using performance measurement to transform state government. Beth Blauer, bottom left, director of StateStat in Maryland, discussed the state’s innovative program. Top right, Carlos Valderrama speaks at the International Committee session on Thursday. Valderrama is from the L.A. Area Chamber of Commerce. Bottom right, attendees at the meeting had the opportunity to enjoy beautiful weather during breaks in the annual meeting. Photos by Travis Caperton.
The energy world is changing. Concerns about energy security and supply security are cutting into petroleum’s hold on the world energy market, said Chris Standlee, executive vice president for Abengoa Bioenergy Corporation and Abengoa Bioenergy of Nebraska. “We believe alternative energy is a solution,” he said. His company is working with not only corn-based ethanol but also with cellulosic.

But he doesn’t believe oil will go away. “Oil will be a commodity that will be replaceable with other commodities,” Standlee said.

He touted the growing popularity of ethanol and the growing interest in cellulosic.

Standlee presented just one of several options in an energy policy workshop, Alternatives to Oil, Thursday afternoon.

West Virginia Commerce Secretary Kelley Goes said her state is looking at all available options, but is keenly interested in the coal technologies being developed, such as coal gasification and coal to liquid. Interest in investing in those technologies, she said, will be determined by the comparable cost of coal versus crude oil.

“We’ve seen those conditions in the economy, but we haven’t seen them stabilize,” she said.

West Virginia included all resources in its renewable portfolio standards. “We just want energy for our country,” she said.

Ann M. Schlenker, manager of Vehicle Systems at the Center for Transportation Research of Argonne National Laboratory, said interest in plug-in electric hybrid vehicles is growing. Getting more of those vehicles on the roads is a goal of the Obama administration, she said.

The interest, she said, has been fueled by volatility of gas prices and climate change. —Mary Branham