Focus on Health Policy a ‘No-Brainer’ for State Leaders

Political leaders throughout the country are focused on health care, as Congress debates several bills aimed at reforming the health care system and state and local governments grapple with growing health care costs in tight budget years.

“One in six dollars spent in the United States goes for health care, so it’s a no-brainer that our political leaders are focused on health care,” said Debra Miller, director of Health Policy for The Council of State Governments.

Miller said it’s incumbent on state leaders to understand the impact of pending congressional action. For that reason, five workshops during the CSG annual meeting in La Quinta will focus on health care.

Attendees will get the chance to hear from leading experts in health policy at the federal and state level, as well as clinical experts in specific ailments and public health officials involved in pandemic flu preparedness.

“Attendees should leave the sessions better understanding the challenges we face in health care and some possible solutions to those challenges,” Miller said.

Alan Weil, executive director of the National Academy for State Health Policy, an independent academy of state health policymakers, said it’s important for state leaders to understand the state role in health care reform coming from the federal government.

“The number of ways that proposed health reform will intersect with what states are doing is much greater than what is often noted in the public debate,” Weil said.

The focus from state governments, he said, is often the impact of expanded Medicaid coverage—a major issue, to be sure, but just one way in which state governments will be affected by reform.

“On the Medicaid side, it’s not just the money,” he said, “but it’s the capacity to assure that people who enroll in the program actually obtain access to care.”

States will also need to contend with a new set of provisions related to the regulation of insurance as well as with the insurance exchanges, if approved, that states will be involved in running, he said.

Weil is one of several speakers throughout the conference on health care reform. In addition to the Thursday workshops, attendees can learn more about health care cost drivers—Alzheimer’s and diabetes—at 9:30 a.m. Friday; state experiences with H1N1 flu at 9:30 a.m. Saturday; and women’s health disparities at 11 a.m. Saturday. All sessions are in Fiesta 1&2.
Social media is changing government. One need only look at the most recent presidential election to see the impact of informal interactions afforded by social networking tools such as Twitter and Facebook. State officials across the country are using those same tools in their campaigns and in governance.

Ben Self, who served as the Democratic National Committee technology director and supervised the technology projects of the national party, will discuss the use of cutting edge digital communications technology in campaigns and governance during the Saturday morning breakfast plenary.

“This transformation has allowed government officials to relate and interact with their constituents in a very informal, frequent manner,” Self said of the new communications technology.

Self is a founding partner of Blue State Digital, a leader in online fundraising, advocacy social networking and constituency development programs for nonprofit organizations, political candidates and causes, and corporations.

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act—along with the recent economic downturn—is prompting states to consider new ways to make government work better.

“When President Obama signed the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into law, he also laid out the highest expectations government has ever had for transparency,” said Beth Blauer, director of Maryland’s innovative StateStat. “Maryland has embraced this mandate not only with how we are tracking (the Recovery Act) but for how we are managing our day-to-day operations and achieving results for our citizens.”

Blauer and Seth Van Aken from the Environmental Systems Research Institute will discuss Maryland’s successes in managing for results at the special half-day policy session Thursday morning. Maryland uses StateStat as a way to reach citizens, provide comparative information to agency managers and executive branch officials, and ultimately, to improve performance in key areas of interest to citizens.

“StateStat is our tool for Marylanders to not only keep tabs on our progress but to hold us accountable. We look forward to sharing our experiences with our colleagues from across the nation and to learn how we too can improve our own process,” said Blauer.

Maryland isn’t alone in transforming government, and other speakers at the session are: Tom Campbell of America Speaks, a nonprofit organization focused on engaging Americans in their government; Robin Campbell, who leads the overall performance management effort in Washington state; Robert Sparks of Florida Performs, the Sunshine State’s performance measurement Web site; Jane Kusiak of Virginia Performs, a performance leadership and accountability system within state government; and Christopher Hoenig, president and CEO of the State of the USA, Inc., a new nonprofit that will provide quality information and advanced technology to enable the American people to assess the status and progress of the U.S.

—Mary Branham

—Jennifer Burnett
Spencer Wells is working to capture a genetic snapshot of humanity before modern-day influences erase it forever.

Wells’ work with the Genographic Project from National Geographic and IBM builds on his earlier work—featured in his book and television program, The Journey of Man—being conducted in collaboration with other scientists around the world.

Wells hopes to close the gaps in our knowledge of human migration by studying humankind’s family tree. The project uses analysis of DNA samples from various races and cultures to map the migration of human genes.

Wells became committed to studying genetic diversity in indigenous populations and unraveling age-old mysteries about early human migration while conducting postdoctoral training at Stanford University’s School of Medicine with Luca Cavalli-Sforza.

Wells’ field studies began in 1996 with his survey of Central Asia. In 1998 Wells and his colleagues expanded their study to include some 25,000 miles of Asia and the former Soviet republics. His landmark research findings led to advances in the understanding of the male Y chromosome and its ability to trace ancestral human migration. Wells then returned to academia where, at Oxford University, he served as director of the Population Genetics Research Group of the Wellcome Trust Centre for Human Genetics.

Following a stint as head of research for a Massachusetts-based biotechnology company, Wells made the decision in 2001 to focus on communicating scientific discovery through books and documentary films. From that was born The Journey of Man: A Genetic Odyssey, an award-winning book and documentary that aired on PBS in the U.S. and National Geographic Channel internationally. Written and presented by Wells, the film chronicled his globe-circling, DNA-gathering expeditions in 2001-2002 and laid the groundwork for the Genographic Project.

Since the Genographic Project began, Wells’ work has taken him to more than three dozen countries, including Chad, Tajikistan, Morocco, Papua New Guinea and French Polynesia, and he recently published his second book, Deep Ancestry: Inside the Genographic Project.

Newsweek’s Meacham Discusses What’s Influencing America

Newsweek editor Jon Meacham writes about a plethora of events, people and history shaping the nation. His cover stories, “We are All Socialists Now,” “The End of Christian America,” “A Storm in the Brain” and “A Conversation with Barack Obama: What He’s Like Now,” touch on big issues in the economy, religion, health and politics in the pages of Newsweek.

He’s also a Pulitzer Prize-winning author with his book, American Lion, a historical biography about Andrew Jackson.

In his role as a journalist and writer, Meacham has a front row seat to the forces affecting America and how those forces are shaping—and have shaped—the next generation of voters.

“For me, every week is an education, and a revelation,” Meacham said of his role at Newsweek.

“There is virtually no issue that we do not deal with in some fashion in the course of publishing the magazine and putting out our Web site. Clearly, though, questions of war and peace, from Afghanistan to Iraq and beyond, loom largest, and I suspect always will.”

But the biggest influence on voters? In Meacham’s opinion, it’s the election of Barack Obama.

“Democrat, Republican or Independent, there is no question that the seminal event for the generation coming of age now—people, say, between 18 and 25—is the election of Barack Obama,” Meacham said. “Now the test is how Obama’s administration defines the relationship between government and the governed.”

—Mikel Chavers
States Focus on Corrections
Corrections in the Crosshairs: What are States Doing to Increase Public Safety While Cutting Prison Spending?
Thursday, Nov. 12 | 3:30–5 p.m. | Fiesta 6

State spending on corrections has been one of the fastest growing expenditures in state governments—growing faster in the last 20 years than most other state budget items. But this year, according to a Vera Institute report, at least 22 states cut corrections spending, reversing a decades-long trend. Vera is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit focused on justice policy and research.

Not only are states cutting prison budgets, some are also dealing with prison overcrowding, while other states are actually shutting down prisons at a time when there's just no extra money to spend on corrections.

Thursday's session will focus on the corrections crunch as well as what the states are doing to increase public safety. Presented by The Council of State Governments Justice Center, Director Michael D. Thompson will lead the corrections discussion with a group of panelists including New York Assemblyman Jeff Aubry, chairman of the Committee on Corrections; James Austin, with JFA Associates; Barbara Broderick, chief probation officer in Maricopa County in Arizona; and James Bueermann, chief of police of Redlands Police Department in California.

Up for discussion: Federal judges in California this year ordered the state to release more than 40,000 state prisoners because of overcrowding issues, according to National Public Radio. The state's prisons are housing twice as many inmates as they're supposed to, according to National Public Radio.

States such as Michigan, New Hampshire, New York and Kansas are shutting down state prison facilities. Although some states are taking advantage of alternative corrections and criminal justice strategies to reduce prison populations, when a prison is closed, most often jobs are lost. And losing jobs because of prison closures is a hard pill to swallow in this recession.

“Job-wise, it’s another big hit,” said Keith Schlaegel, city manager for Stockton, Kan. His small, rural town lost 32 state jobs as a result of a prison closure. Stockton wasn’t the only small town in Kansas rocked by the prison closures. The state closed six prison facilities—five so far this year and one last year.

By closing those facilitates and shuffling around other prisoners, Kansas cut 447 prison beds out of the state's budget, according to Roger Werholtz, secretary of the Department of Corrections. That means a savings of around $7.8 million just by shutting down prisons.

—Mikel Chavers

State Stimulus Successes on the Road to Recovery
Policy Workshop—Transportation
Thursday, Nov. 12 | 1:30–3 p.m. | Fiesta 3&4

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 set aside $27.5 billion for highway and bridge projects—and that investment has been perhaps the most closely scrutinized portion of the $787 billion stimulus package.

While states faced an Oct. 10 deadline for the first electronic reports on the receipt and use of those funds, the true impact of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 will likely be analyzed for months and years to come.

Still, before any numbers were tallied detailing the economic impact of all those “shovel-ready” projects that tied up traffic this summer, the significant and potentially long-term impact for state governments was already clear. State governments changed procedures to get projects underway, instituted unprecedented transparency and accountability initiatives, and worked long hours to meet federal reporting requirements.

Thursday’s session will preview the official release of a new national report from The Council of State Governments—“Shovel Ready or Not? State Stimulus Successes on the Road to Recovery.” The report highlights efforts of states that are distinguishing themselves in some aspect of implementing the infrastructure spending portion of the Recovery Act. The report is due out in January.

Orville Brewster “Bud” Fitch, New Hampshire deputy attorney general and director of the Office of Economic Stimulus; Mike Mower, Utah’s state planning coordinator for the Recovery Act; and Beth Blauer, director of Maryland’s StateStat Office, will discuss their states’ oversight and management of the stimulus money during a transportation policy workshop Thursday afternoon.

Sean Slone, CSG transportation policy analyst, will also be available in the CSG booth from 3:30 to 4 p.m. Friday to answer questions and preview the report. Read more about the report in the November/December State News at statenews.csg.org.

Check out Capitol Comments for blogging from the meeting!
www.csg.org