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THE RICHARD STOCKTON COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY



Stockton College Panel Offers Ideas to Obama on Health Care Reform

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Galloway Township, NJ- The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey hosted a blue-ribbon panel of area educators, health care professionals and community members to respond to President-elect Barack Obama's invitation to participate in health care reform discussions.

The Stockton Health Policy Forum, which is a panel comprised of public schools, colleges, municipalities, counties, a local rehabilitation center and area hospitals, met recently at Stockton and formulated outcomes for submission to the President-elect's transition team.

"Geographically, the South Jersey region is a microcosm of the United States, which provides a paradigmatic perspective," said Dr. Reva Curry, Stockton's Interim Dean, School of Health Sciences. "Within a 10-mile radius of the campus there are urban, rural and suburban communities with highly diverse populations and income levels."

The discussion, which lasted nearly two hours, yielded several themes for health care reform related to the costs of providing quality health care. The group offered South Jersey as a pilot site for the President-elect's reform initiatives. "The diversity of population and income levels combined with a spirit of collaboration between county, local government, health care and education would make us an ideal location for pilot programs," Dr. Curry said.

Following are some of the findings of the panel:

- Emphasis should be placed on the distinction between cost-containment strategies, which provide real cost reduction, versus strategies, which appear to reduce cost but merely shift it to another area. For example, cost containment happens when predetermined patient care pathways are followed, which utilize best practices of medicine, with demonstrated efficient and effective treatment processes over heavily marketed, or higher priced alternatives. An example of cost shifting is when hospitals provide charity care to indigent patients, and then must shift the costs to other areas in health care including paying patients, in order to recoup all or part of the expense. The Stockton panel supports cost containment and does not support cost shifting.

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- Medical care inflation is driven by a “push-pull” effect, which drives costs up. The “push” occurs when inflated costs result as medical suppliers and drug companies tout consumer use of more expensive, but not necessarily more effective supplies (examples are the less expensive ceramic hip versus the more expensive titanium hip replacement, or generic vs. name-brand prescriptions). The “pull” occurs from consumer demand for these higher priced items, because consumers believe it is “better” than lower priced, equally effective alternatives. The panel does not support the push-pull effect that is driving health care costs higher.
- The panel advocates the fairness of care. It does not support the current environment where the healthy and wealthy pay less than the poor and sick.
- The argument for equitable health care for all has been confused with an argument about types of health care insurance, the panel believes. These are two separate issues of which the right to basic health care is our foremost concern. A model the panel recommends is one in which all Americans be provided with basic, needed medical care. This level of care forms a “floor” or “threshold” below which no one should fall. Employers buy coverage for their employees at the “floor” level. If employers choose not to purchase coverage, they could contribute instead into a pool which, in turn, would provide the basic coverage. Higher health care options would be provided on an individual purchase basis or as an employer benefit.

Stockton’s Health Policy Forum discussions and outreach will continue. The panel pledged to continue to meet on a regular basis, with the next meeting set for February 27. As part of the group’s outreach, it plans to send copies of its report to Senators Frank Lautenberg and Robert Menendez as well as to Governor Jon Corzine.

Members and affiliations of Stockton Health Policy Forum:

- Alan Beatty, Vice-President of Human Resources, Shore Memorial Hospital, Somers Point, NJ
- Stephen Bruner, Executive Director, Workforce Improvement Board, Atlantic and Cape May Counties, Pleasantville, NJ
- Phil Guenther, Superintendent, Atlantic County Vocational School District, Mays Landing, NJ
- Al Gutierrez, President and CEO, Shore Memorial Hospital, Somers Point, NJ
- Richard Kathrins, President and CEO, Bacharach Rehabilitation Center, Pomona, NJ

The following Stockton Health Policy Forum members are staff or faculty from The Richard Stockton College of NJ:

- Ron Caplan, Associate Professor of Public Health
- Sharon Schulman, Executive Director of The William J. Hughes Center on Public Policy
- Cynthia Sonowski, Executive Director of Continuing Studies for Health Sciences and Health Services
- Dennis Weiss, Dean of the School of Natural Arts, Mathematics, and Sciences
- Lynn Berkowitz, Assistant Dean, School of Health Sciences
- Reva Curry, Interim Dean, School of Health Sciences

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