
7 STEPS

TO A HEALTHIER HEALTH SYSTEM FOR NEW HAMPSHIRE

New Hampshire's health care system faces critical challenges. Health care expenses are rising rapidly and are expected to double in the next six years. Health insurance coverage—which is largely based on employment—is declining, which shifts expenses to public and private programs. Meanwhile, public programs such as Medicare and Medicaid generally pay less than the actual cost of care. With rising costs and fewer people to share the expenses, health insurance rates are skyrocketing. The health care safety net is straining, the entire system is increasingly unstable, and the quality of our health care is at risk.

The Citizens Roundtable on Health Costs and Coverage has completed an extensive survey of the issues facing New Hampshire's health care system. The full findings of the Citizens Roundtable are available in the report "Stepping Up to the Future." They are summarized here as seven steps to a healthier health care system.

As concerned citizens of New Hampshire, we need to:

1. WORK TOGETHER

To address the ongoing challenges facing our health care system, we recommend forming a private/public partnership. This group should be non-partisan and broadly representative of the state's residents, and should have considerable influence, but not authority, on issues related to health care. The group's role would be to carry forward and expand on the recommendations of the Citizens Roundtable, assist state government in evaluating the state's health care needs over the next five to ten years, assess the current capacity, and determine how the existing health care system can meet those needs. This should be an open, collaborative process that assures the ongoing health of our state's health care system. It should also be a thoughtful and deliberate process, since actions can have unintended consequences and a combination of relatively small actions could unintentionally harm the health care system.

2. MAINTAIN AND EVEN EXPAND INSURANCE COVERAGE

We need to encourage employers—including municipalities, school districts, and other public sector employers—to maintain coverage for their employees and families to the greatest degree possible. We should avoid more changes to insurance laws and regulations

that would cause covered people to lose insurance coverage, since losing coverage only shifts costs to the public sector and to the safety net, putting more stress on community care providers. We should avoid cuts to Medicaid, NH Healthy Kids (the State Children's Health Insurance Program), and other public programs, as such cuts would cause more people to lose public coverage, shift costs to the private sector, and further destabilize safety net providers.

In the longer term, we need to maintain and expand health insurance coverage. In the private sector, this might mean helping employers insure their workers, possibly through tax credits or subsidies for providing coverage. In the public sector, we should maximize the federal dollars we receive for public insurance by, for example, expanding NH Healthy Kids to cover older teens and young adults, families, and other adults. (Since the federal government provides two-thirds of the funding for this program, it actually costs New Hampshire less money.) We should make it easier for citizens to shop for and purchase health insurance by standardizing benefit packages, offering tiers of coverage so people have more affordable options to meet their needs, and investigating such ideas as reinsurance pools and more group purchasing of insurance. (See the full report for more suggestions.)



3. KEEP COSTS UNDER CONTROL

As insurance premiums rise, employers and individuals reduce or drop coverage altogether. Rising health costs make insurance premiums rise even further and cause still greater decline in coverage. To limit cost increases, we should avoid adding new mandates to health insurance coverage. We should also avoid expanding health facilities or adding new technologies when the value of those expansions to our health system are uncertain.

4. SHORE UP THE SAFETY NET

We need to provide adequate government support for our essential community providers—community health and mental health centers, clinics, public health departments, and hospital emergency departments—which provide health care for the increasing number of our residents who lack insurance or who are underinsured.

5. IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF OUR HEALTH CARE

Although New Hampshire fares better than many states on measurements of health care quality, we can and should do better. We need to promote health and prevent illness and injury through education, public awareness campaigns, and intervention activities. We should promote proven standards of care among providers and patients, implement cost-effective management for chronic diseases, and eliminate overutilization of unnecessary services and diagnostic tests. Finally, we should all take better care of ourselves through better diet and exercise, and we must work to reduce substance abuse.

6. WORK TOWARD MALPRACTICE REFORM

In many states, escalating malpractice premiums have caused medical specialists to leave practice. To prevent this from happening in New Hampshire, we need to consider a comprehensive package of malpractice reforms that will encourage quality patient care, keep medical providers in practice, adequately compensate injured parties and hold the line on insurance costs.

7. MAKE SURE WE HAVE THE INFORMATION WE NEED

To keep our health system healthy, we need accurate information on all aspects of the system, and that information needs to be broadly available. On the state level, the Department of Insurance and the Department of Health and Human Services need to complete work on projects such as: the Comprehensive Health Care Information System, a universal claims database; providing public access to information on the health insurance market in New Hampshire; and plans to provide health care price and quality information on the Internet—information that would allow patients to compare services and become better informed users of the health care system.

Beyond that, we need to make available information that is already collected, such as how health insurance premiums are determined. In some cases, we need new systems for collecting information and making it available, such as data on medical malpractice, the cost of hospital care for uninsured patients, and cost and reimbursement rates for Medicaid services.

Over the long term, we need to increase the use of computerized medical records and physician orders, find new ways to finance information systems, encourage the use of standardized forms and codes for patient records, and develop systems that let patients learn to take better care of themselves. In addition to increasing efficiency, improved information technology will help us improve the quality of health care and control costs.

CONCLUSION

As citizens of New Hampshire, we have an obligation to ourselves, our families and our neighbors to ensure the stability of our health care system. The recommendations presented here are not quick fixes, but important steps on the road to a healthier health care system. New Hampshire is a small state and enjoys a commitment to community and civic life that makes such changes possible. We have a strong foundation on which to build a stronger and better health care system, one that provides affordable, quality health care to all our citizens. This will require hard work, setting priorities, a willingness to compromise, and the flexibility to change. The reward will be a healthier health care system for all of us.

