

Better health care focus of town hall

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SIERRA VISTA — The need for health care reform to ensure a basic level of care for everyone in Arizona is one of the most pressing issues facing our state.

Seeking ways for delivering accessible, affordable and accountable health care was the primary focus of the 90th Arizona Town Hall, which was discussed Thursday with local community members.



Lanny Kope, retired principal from Phoenix area schools and trustee at the Sierra Vista Regional Health Center, speaks during the Arizona Town Hall meeting at Cochise College, Sierra Vista Campus. (Ed Honda-Herald/Review)

The town hall plays a critical role in bringing business and community leaders together to discuss pertinent issues, with health care as the focus of the 90th town hall session held in Prescott on April 15-18.

Statistics indicate that almost one in five people in Arizona do not have health insurance coverage. The general consensus is “we must do better.”

Town hall participants addressed ways to improve health care in Arizona and brought recommendations back to their communities for post town hall discussions. The 136 participants from all areas of the state discussed a range of health-related issues, to include: Physician and nursing shortages, high cost of liability insurance paid by physicians, preventive care, individual responsibility, rising costs of health care premiums and the use of technology for such advancements as electronic medical records.

During a Post Arizona Town Hall Program at the Sierra Vista campus of Cochise College on Thursday, members of the community gathered to hear and discuss some of the recommendations for improving health care in Arizona, how to make it accessible and affordable. The event was hosted by Karen Nicodemus, president of Cochise College.

Long wait times to see physicians, high cost of health care coverage, high co-pay costs and more than a million uninsured Arizonans are just some of the challenges the town hall addressed.

Those attending the Town Hall session in Prescott included Lanny Kope, former school principal

in Phoenix and a board of trustee member for Sierra Vista Regional Health Center, and Carolyn Boardman, chief pharmacist at the Raymond W. Bliss Army Health Center Pharmacy. Judy Gignac, vice president and general manager of Bella Vista Ranches, chairs the program's follow-up committee and served as the former chair of the Arizona Town Hall.

The discussion kicked off with brief comments from those who attended the town hall.

Kope stressed the importance of making Arizona more attractive to health care professionals, especially in rural areas where physician and nursing shortages are most critical.

"The high cost of liability insurance is directly impacting physician retention in this area," Kope said. The cost of liability insurance is going out of sight.

Medical liability reform, he added, may be one way to make Arizona more attractive to health care professionals.

Reading from the Town Hall's pamphlet of recommendations, Kope also spoke of delays in reimbursements for medical services and the impact those delays have on hospitals.

"Health care should be funded as efficiently as possible," he said. "AHCCCS reimbursement continues to be a problem."

There needs to be simplification of AHCCCS claims, Kope added.

Boardman talked about making rural areas more attractive for health care professionals at the college level by providing incentives to graduating students. She also touched on the importance of technology in health care, especially in the areas of electronic medical records, improved communications and sharing of information between health care providers and patients.

Gignac led the group discussion by offering a brief overview of how the town hall works.

"Understand we have two town halls every year," she said.

The Arizona Town Hall brings together a wide cross section of Arizona citizens to consider and discuss a key topic of concern for Arizona. The next town hall session will be sometime in the fall and will address land use planning.

Providing a focal point for discussion, town hall President Tara Jackson posed the question, "What can the people in this room do to improve health care in Arizona?"

Margaret Hepburn, chief executive officer of Sierra Vista Regional Health Center, spoke about the hospital's effort for completing a community assessment where unmet health care needs are assessed.

"We have a large body of information to present to the board of trustees and will be prioritizing that information," she said.

The shortage of health care professionals is another problem she addressed.

Preventative care to help lower health care costs was suggested by Diane McDaniel, a member of the hospital board of trustees.

“Eighty percent of our health care dollars are spent on chronic illness,” she said.

McDaniel suggested offering incentives to employees for making healthy lifestyle choices.

Gignac agreed, saying employers should consider implementing programs where employees are rewarded for such healthy commitments as smoking cessation, working out and weight loss.

Edith Sampson, a registered nurse with Chiricahua Community Health Centers Inc., spoke about some of the health challenges in dealing with migrant farmers.

“We serve people who don’t have insurance at all,” she said. “We actually go out in fields and provide health care to migrant farmers. I think this is a service that most people don’t even know we provide.”

Chiricahua health centers could use two more nurses, she said, but trying to convince health care professionals to work in such rural areas with those kinds of challenges is no easy task.

Jackson closed the session with a summary statement, compiling input from the different discussions.