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Expanded access to health care urged

By Dan Gearino | Tuesday, November 28, 2006

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DES MOINES — An Iowa think tank is urging legislators to dramatically expand access to health care, rather than rely on piecemeal fixes.

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership issued a report Monday that critiques the current system and recommends big changes. The main problem, according to author Colin Gordon, is that employment-based health care is an inefficient way to make sure people are covered.

“I really think trying to patch up employment-based health care is like moving furniture into a burning house,” said Gordon, who is a history professor at the University of Iowa.

The long-term solution, he said, is universal health care. He hopes to see lawmakers take incremental steps toward that goal.

Maine, Massachusetts and Vermont have each begun health-care programs intended to expand insurance coverage, either through state-provided insurance or a mandate that residents have some kind of insurance. Gordon said each of those examples may be adaptable to Iowa.

What won't work, he said, are small ideas, such as tax breaks for people who put money in health savings accounts. He said such accounts are harmful to the overall system because they encourage young and healthy people to reduce their health insurance, which makes insurance more expensive for everybody else.

The report has broad guidelines, with no cost estimates.

The Iowa Fiscal Partnership is a budget analysis think tank that is operated by two other research groups, the Iowa Policy Project in Mount Vernon and the Child & Family Policy Center in Des Moines.

In recent years, the Fiscal Partnership has issued calls for reform that were immediately rejected by the Republicans who controlled the Legislature. This upcoming session, the situation will be different, with a Democratic governor and Democratic majorities in both houses of the Legislature.

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Rep. Mark Smith of Marshalltown, one of the leading Democrats on health-care issues, said voters expect progress on the issues.

"I do prefer comprehensive reform whenever possible," he said.

As for specifics, he said the first few months of next year will be spent assessing the situation and looking for the best short- and long-term options.

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Guidelines

Among the guidelines to expand access to health care are four priorities that should be the goals of any reform effort, according to Colin Gordon, author of a report by the Iowa Fiscal Partnership:

Reform must expand the pool of people who have access to health care.

Insurance coverage should be easily accessible and portable.

Coverage should be affordable.

Coverage should be high quality.

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