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Roberts launches health-care initiative

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By Scott MacKay

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From left, Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts; John McDonough, of Health Care For All; and Saul Kaplan, of the state Economic Development Corporation, chat at the RIEDC offices yesterday.

The Providence Journal / Bill Murphy

PROVIDENCE — Rhode Island's state government may be awash in red ink, but Lt. Gov. Elizabeth Roberts said yesterday that the state's projected \$450-million deficit should not block discussion of ways of reining in health-care costs and searching for ways to provide affordable health care to the roughly 10 percent of the state's residents who lack health insurance.

Roberts, a Cranston Democrat, yesterday hosted a meeting at state Economic Development Corporation offices in Providence about an initiative she calls Mission: Healthy Rhode Island, which will consider changes in state health-care policies that will be presented to the 2008 General Assembly session, which begins in January.

So far, Roberts, who has been involved in health-care issues at the State House for years — she is a former Cranston senator — is long on rhetoric and study and short on specifics. Which, at this point, she says, is fine.

For now, she is trying to gather ideas that will be put into legislation by mid-January.

“Inaction is not an option for the future of health care in Rhode Island,” said Roberts. “The stakes are too high to sit by and watch. We cannot stand by passively as more small business owners see their premiums rise at unsustainable rates and more Rhode Island families find themselves uninsured.”

Yesterday's meeting was attended by about 60 people representing the many players in the state's medical care business, including representatives of business, organized labor, hospitals, insurance companies, advocacy and nonprofit groups and several political figures, including state Representatives Arthur Handy, D-Cranston, and Al Gemma, D-Warwick. Seven more sessions of the group have been scheduled: on Nov. 30, Dec. 7, 14 and 21 and Jan. 4, 11 and 18.

The meeting included a presentation by John E. McDonough, executive director of Health Care for All, Massachusetts' leading consumer health-care organization. McDonough was instrumental in crafting the Massachusetts plan that aims to insure all state residents by requiring that they obtain coverage and helping poor people pay for it.

Rhode Island's budget problems will obviously limit what can be done in the short term, said Roberts. But, because about one-third of all state expenditures is for such health-care programs as the RiteCare and Medicaid programs that cover poor and some middle-class residents, controlling costs can make a dent in state spending, Roberts said.

So the group will study what other states are doing to control costs before submitting legislation. "We are looking at what other states have done and what is doable in Rhode Island."

Some of the ideas will be easier to put into effect than others. For example, Massachusetts has a state Web site that allows consumers to easily compare the costs and benefits of various health insurance plans. "This helps people become smart shoppers for health insurance," said Roberts.

Other ideas may be more difficult and will involve changing long-held habits, such as weaning people off the use of hospital emergency rooms for health problems that can be treated more cheaply at a clinic or doctor's office.

Another cost-saving initiative would be to find ways to help patients with chronic diseases such as diabetes and asthma to better control their conditions to keep them out of high-cost hospital stays, Roberts said.

Roberts says she supports the Massachusetts element of requiring that all Rhode Islanders obtain health insurance, much as both Rhode Island and Massachusetts require motorists to have auto insurance.

Nothing should be done, Roberts said, to change employer-based insurance for those who want it. "We're not out to change what's right with our system; we are looking at what's wrong," said Roberts.

"All the options are on the table," said Roberts in an interview yesterday. "This isn't going to happen overnight. It took a three-year process to bring change in Massachusetts."

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