

Health care reform for state gets push

By Pat Schneider
The Capital Times

Wisconsin citizens must organize to demand reform of a health care system whose costs are galloping out of control, a labor leader and a policy analyst told health care advocates Wednesday.

David Newby, president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, said that the time has come to abandon the current mess and adopt a Canadian-style national health care program. 'The system is beginning to fracture and self-destruct,' said Newby. To accomplish the fundamental change that is needed, policy-makers 'have got to be willing to put aside the ideological bias that health care has to be a private, profit-driven system.'

Newby joined a panel that also included Joel Rogers, director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy; Wayne Corey, executive director of the Wisconsin Independent Business Inc.; Rep. Sheldon Wasserman, D-Milwaukee, ranking minority member of the Assembly Health Committee and a physician; and Rep. Mary Ann Lippert, R-Pittsville, also a member of the Health Committee.

The group discussed the issues at 'Community Connecting for Coverage,' a statewide conference on health care access sponsored by Covering Kids Wisconsin, a coalition of advocacy organizations, hospitals and religious groups.

Rogers also argued that health care is a unique 'commodity' not suited to the marketplace. 'There is unlikely to be a price reduction unless you get a bunch of people together - like a state - in a public initiative,' he said. Rogers and Newby put the blame for spiraling health care costs on the insurance companies that own the health care system; competition among pharmaceutical companies; and the bureaucracy that attends the current system of multiple providers.

Twenty-five percent of health care dollars go for unnecessary paperwork," Newby asserted. And the health industry has the money and clout to lobby against change, he said.

Corey also pointed the finger at health insurance companies. Costs for health insurance have risen so dramatically that some small businesses, whose interests he represents to the Legislature are being forced to drop coverage for their employees. The crisis has reached such proportions that Corey questioned: "When does health care move from a political issue to a moral issue?" Lippert put the onus for the state of the health care system on consumers. "If we as a society valued prevention and didn't look to medication to 'fix' everything, health care costs wouldn't be so high," said Lippert, a community health educator by profession.

Wasserman urged consumers to become knowledgeable and involved in their care, and said workers should demand the coverage they want from their employers' A practicing obstetrician-gynecologist, Wasserman favors an Oregon-style system that ranks pro-

cedures by cost effectiveness and pays accordingly. 'I don't think we'll see a single-payer system in any shape or form happening in America,' said Wasserman. After the Clinton Plan was shot down a decade ago, politicians "don't want to touch it. It's a third rail"

"You've got to get over that," retorted Newby, who decried the lack of political leadership on health care issues.

Darcy Haber of Wisconsin Citizen Action, in a comment from the audience, protested the way some of the legislators on the panel pointed to patients as a source of the problem. "It 'shouldn't be dumped on consumers,' she said. -

"Politicians say they have the political will to reform the system," she commented later. "Why aren't they out there with propos-



State AFL-CIO President Dave Newby speaks Wednesday during a forum on health care worries