

# Cuomo team hears ways to fix Medicaid

## Recipients, providers, government officials speak out on problems

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News Political Reporter

Published: January 20, 2011, 12:27 AM

One message came out of the first state hearing dedicated to reducing Medicaid costs: The state is serious this time.

After decades of warnings about costs associated with the nation's biggest and most expensive health program, members of the governor's Medicaid Redesign Team emphasized Wednesday that a \$10 billion budget deficit makes major changes imperative.

"We must find efficiencies; we must find savings," said Jason Helgerson, state Medicaid director. "That's the bottom line."

Several hundred people jammed the auditorium in the Roswell Park Cancer Institute's Research Studies Center for the first of seven hearings across the state designed to gauge public opinion and gather suggestions on reducing Medicaid costs.

The health program now constitutes about 20 percent of the budgets for both the state and Erie County.

The panel heard from dozens of local people, who were limited to two minutes. They ranged from Medicaid recipients and providers to heads of powerful health organizations, hospital chief executives and government officials. All seemed to recognize the need for changes to lower costs.

Mike Rogers, a Buffalo resident who uses a wheelchair, questioned why he needs to keep recertifying for services when — barring a miracle — his condition never will change.

"That takes up resources," he said. "That takes more paperwork, and it's just useless."

Dr. Raul Vazquez, a physician at Urban Family Practice on Niagara Street, said taxpayers consider his Medicaid patients "second-class citizens" and a "burden."

"God forbid any of you guys get sick over six months," he said. "You're going to fall onto Medicaid, and you're going to see what kind of Cadillac system we have in this state, which is the lousiest."

Laurie Kostrzewski brought a list of suggestions from her group, Taxed Enough Already, which included a residency requirement and an end to fraud, abuse and waste.

"I'd like to see less of us have to downscale our homes because we couldn't afford to pay the taxes, which pays for Medicaid here in Erie County," she said.

Better communication between the county and state could limit that waste, Erie County Comptroller Mark C. Poloncarz said.

Last year, he noted, his office discovered that a Medicaid-funded transportation program for brain-injured clients was shuttling patients to cigarette stores and restaurants, and only then did county officials learn they were not responsible for those payments.

James R. Kaskie, president of Kaleida Health, urged fixing the problem. "Let us redesign Medicaid," he said. "Let us redesign care and the payment system."

The hearings stem from one of Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's first executive orders, which formed the redesign team and charged it with eliminating waste and inefficiency while improving health care.

But as previous governors discovered, the task is monumental in this state, where 4.7 million people now are enrolled in the program.

"We will hit \$75 billion in spending by 2014 if we don't take assertive action in redesign," said Greg Allen, the state Health Department's financial planning and policy director.

Some suggested ways to streamline the program, such as uniform credentialing. Karen Nelson, chief executive officer of Planned Parenthood of Western New York, cited 17 pieces of paper needed to enroll in the Medicaid waiver program.

Some health care professionals at the session privately expressed the idea that the hearings merely provide "cover" for cost cuts already planned by the new administration.

But the panel — which includes Dr. Nirav R. Shah, a Buffalo native appointed by Cuomo as state health commissioner — emphasized it expects to incorporate many of the suggestions it hears around the state.

"As a result, we will have some very hard choices," he said.

The panel expects to submit its initial ideas in a few weeks and a comprehensive plan by a Nov. 11 deadline.

The state moves dovetail into a plan recently revived on the county level by County Executive Chris Collins. He has suggested letting counties decide which Medicaid extras to offer. It is considered unlikely to be implemented.

Still, Collins used his Collins for Our Future campaign fund to conduct a "tele-town hall" session Wednesday morning. A machine dialed about 70,000 Erie County homes and a recorded voice asked occupants if they would like to join a conference call. Collins' aides said about 20,000 homes joined some part of the hourlong event, during which Collins answered two dozen questions.

The aides said that about 2,000 people responded to the question of where they stood on Collins proposal to let counties drop some of the extra Medicaid services offered in this state. Nearly 78 percent said they supported the idea, his aides said.