



Published in the *Providence Journal*, June 12, 2010

Making health reform happen in R.I.

By Elizabeth Roberts and Neil Steinberg

The passage this year of federal health-care reform legislation was a monumental first step in ensuring that all Americans have access to high-quality, affordable health care. Now what? What does this mean for Rhode Islanders? What should health reform in the state look like?

Implementation will vary from state to state. We believe that Rhode Island is uniquely positioned and may even be at an advantage to implement a plan that could serve as a model for other states. There are three principal elements that must be in place for health reform to be successful: a strong system of primary care; expansion of insurance coverage; and strategies to support cost containment. The federal reforms support these three components to varying degrees. But, without action on all three, it's not possible to get very far.

The Rhode Island Foundation and the office of the lieutenant governor are currently offering a venue to examine these elements through a series of public forums, "Making It Work: Health Reform in Rhode Island."

The series brings together national leaders in health reform with business and community leaders, medical providers, insurers, educators, consumer advocates and policy makers to chart the course for a new, affordable, high-quality health-care system in Rhode Island. Making It Work is exploring not only the challenges and opportunities of implementing a new system, but also the models that are working well in other parts of the country.

By providing a platform for these discussions we hope to foster collaborations that will leverage important changes in Rhode Island from existing success stories. At the same time, we are building a framework of support for innovation in our state's growing health-care sector.

There is much in Rhode Island upon which we can build this framework. Consider the following: The state's requirement that health insurers dramatically increase the proportion of their expenses devoted to primary care as a way to build a more affordable health-care system can serve as a national model.

The Chronic Care Sustainability Initiative, spearheaded by the office of the health commissioner, is an effort to develop new ways for primary care to offer a "medical home" that coordinates care, particularly for those with chronic conditions. Effective management of these diseases in ways that empower patients will create a more affordable health-care system. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island's recent decision to increase payment to primary-care doctors for effective management of "complex cases" is another step ahead.

The Rhode Island Foundation has placed a strong system of primary care at the center of its priorities for the next five years. Through its Fund for a Healthy Rhode Island, more than \$1.6 million has already been granted to innovative projects focused on accessibility to good primary care.

A unique loan-forgiveness program funded through a coalition of Blue Cross, the Rhode Island Medical Society and the Foundation is providing funds to help attract more primary-care professionals to Rhode Island.

Progress is being made, yet much work remains to be done.

While it is true that much of the federal health package will not take effect until 2013, it is imperative that we start planning for change today. About 140,000 Rhode Islanders under 65, 16 percent of the population, do not have access to good, affordable preventative health care. Providing care for even a percentage of these uninsured costs more than \$600 million annually. Directing these hundreds of millions of dollars to a robust, patient-centered preventive primary-care system through the provision of affordable health insurance would represent a much better investment in the wellbeing of our citizens.

“Making It Work” provides a public forum to discuss opportunities to build just such a robust primary-care system. These sessions have already spurred the creation of the Coalition for Primary Care, which will serve to coordinate efforts to improve access to primary care in Rhode Island. The resulting partnerships will undoubtedly yield innovative thinking that will enhance the development of a comprehensive health-care system in our state, one that can be the envy of the nation.

The next session will be on July 15, at 5:30 p.m., at the Rhode Island Foundation, 1 Union Station, Providence.

Elizabeth Roberts is lieutenant governor of Rhode Island. Neil Steinberg is president and chief executive of The Rhode Island Foundation.