

Reprinted courtesy of Suburban News Publication; originally published March 18, 2009

We have chances to help the uninsured

By KATHLEEN GMEINER, GUEST COLUMNIST

March 21-28 is the seventh national observance of Cover the Uninsured Week, started by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to focus attention on one of our nation's most serious problems.

As part of the Franklin County Covering Kids and Families Coalition, we are working hard to bring to the public's attention the issue of lack of health insurance. Unfortunately, the number of uninsured adults continues to rise. Yet, the number of uninsured children is going down.

Why? Because we as a nation and state have gotten serious about addressing the problem for children. And the good news is that we have the opportunity and the commitment from our national and state leaders to address health care reform. Federal and state proposals can both continue the efforts to close the insurance gap for Ohio's children and begin to reverse the trend for uninsured adults.

There's a lot of talk that health care reform may have to wait until better economic times. And Ohio's families do need real economic relief now. But we can make real improvements in the economy by making health care more affordable.

In its recent report, "The Cost of Doing Nothing: Why the Cost of Failing to Fix Our Health System is Greater than the Cost of Reform," the New American Foundation found that "the economic cost of not fixing our health care system is greater than the upfront cost of comprehensive health care reform."

The report continues that the U.S. economy "loses hundreds of billions of dollars every year because of the diminished health and shorter lifespan of the uninsured. Rising health care costs undermine the ability of U.S. firms to compete internationally, threaten the stability of American jobs and place increasing strain on local, state and federal budgets. As health care costs continue to

rise faster than wages, health insurance becomes more and more unaffordable for more and more American families every day."

There are things Ohio can do this year to reduce the number of uninsured Ohioans.

The first is to support the implementation of Medicaid coverage for children up to 300 percent of the Federal Poverty level (\$54,930 for a family of three). This was passed with bipartisan support in 2007, but until recently was held up by federal roadblocks. Now, Ohio is scheduled to cover more kids starting July 1, 2009.

And, to make real progress on the adult side, the legislature can pass key items in the governor's budget, including lowering the premiums that health insurance companies can charge persons with pre-existing conditions denied coverage in the individual market; allowing coverage for dependent children on their family's policy to age 29; requiring businesses to help employees buy health insurance using pre-tax dollars; and changing Medicaid's requirement for recertification for parents from six months to 12 months, which causes many families to fall through the cracks.

Franklin County officials must work to bring federal stimulus and other funds to ensure that our community-based health services can keep their doors open and provide needed primary care services.

The weak economy only heightens the urgent need for health care reform at both the state and federal levels. Ohio's policymakers should begin their look at the health care system by enacting the reforms that have already been proposed. We should not stop until all Ohioans are able to get high quality medical care at the right time and in the right place.

There will be an enrollment event from noon to 4 p.m. Sunday, March 22 at Temple Israel, 5419 E. Broad St. in Columbus. Families who need health coverage should call the Ohio Benefit Bank at 800-648-1176 and schedule an appointment with Nan Roscoe.

Kathleen Gmeiner is project director of Ohio Consumers for Health Coverage.

Read more Central Ohio news, commentary and sports at the Suburban News Publications website, ColumbusLocalNews.com