



Health forum decries current care methods

By Jill Coley
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'They send patients to us who can't pay. That's not a system,' said Ronald A. Ravenell, executive director of the Franklin C. Fetter Family Health Center, at the community health forum in McClellanville on Dec. 30.

McClellanville — More than 30 consumers and health care professionals gathered last week to tackle a daunting question: What is the biggest problem with the nation's health care system?

Their answer was succinct: There is no system.

Fragmentation and inefficiency are endemic, the group said. One participant described a revolving door of medical clinics, hospitals and private physicians. And no one knows what the others are doing.

They also indicted the insurance industry for placing a barrier between consumers and providers that is based on making a profit.

Those were the messages participants wanted to send to President-elect Barack Obama. The Dec. 30 meeting was one of thousands held across the country at Obama's behest, a

grassroots experiment in policy-making.

Two main schools of thought

formed inside Greater St. Peter's

AME Church, tucked in the woods, down a country road.

One group advocated education as the answer to health care disparity. About 10 years ago, Florene Linnen, director of the Georgetown County Diabetes CORE, was diagnosed with diabetes. At the time, she thought, "It's just a little sugar, nothing to worry about."

When she learned that 75 people in her church were diabetic, and the nearest doctor was half an hour away, she took matters into her own hands. "People needed help. People were dying. People were having amputations," she said.

Through grit and dedication, a health center was born to educate diabetics about diet and exercise.

Physicians and administrators at the forum had no hope for making do with the current system.

Ronald A. Ravenell, executive director of the Franklin C. Fetter Family Health Center, said, "They send patients to us who can't pay. That's not a system." When clinics try to refer patients for specialty treatment, they're blockaded, Ravenell said.

Alfred Daniels, medical director of the St. James-Santee Family Health Center, likened the system to people running around in a field of tall rye grass, unable to see the edge. "What about those who fall off and show up in my office with chest pain and they're not sick enough to refer," he said. "There's no system here."

To qualify for Medicaid, which covers care for the poor and disabled, some have to sell off everything they own. "Poor folks are being forced to get rid of all their property to maintain their health," said Fred Lincoln of Cainhoy. "You shouldn't have to become indigent to get health care."

Even those better off suffer from fragmented care. Daniels shared a story of his 100-year-old mother, who recently suffered acute back pain. Getting the emergency room physician, a specialist and her primary doctor on the same page was a Herculean task, he said.

Daniels advocated a single-payer system, similar to those used in Canada, excising the insurance industry. He scoffed at a criticism often leveled against universal health care, that people must wait for non-emergency care.

"Let me tell you about my waiting list, and it's age 65," he said. Daniels has patients in their 40s who need hip replacements, but have no hope of getting the surgery until they age into Medicare.

Juanita Middleton, former educator and consultant for a mental health partnership with

Charleston County School District, was baffled by what she's paying her private insurer for, when they shift most of her costs onto Medicare.

"Medicare pays so much for me. What am I paying Blue Cross Blue Shield for?"

Insurance companies wield massive political power, and toppling them would be revolutionary, participants agreed. Obama has proposed a new public plan, similar to Medicare, that would compete against private insurers.

"Medical care is a right, not a privilege," said Daniels, an idea considered as radical today as when he was in school decades ago. "We haven't got there yet. In fact, I think we're getting worse."

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