



## Mixed feelings on health reform as providers gauge impact

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As Democratic lawmakers celebrate a historic health care reform bill, consumers, patients, hospitals, clinics and businesses tried to gauge how and when it might impact them.

Many of the players in the local health care system said they were hopeful the changes to the way medical care is paid for and purchased would bring more people into the system and bring down premium costs for everyone.

"It would definitely motivate me to get coverage, though I'm still not sure how this is all going to play out," said Keely Nelson, 40, an uninsured, self-employed massage therapist from Bedford Hills.

Under the bill, which President Barack Obama is expected to sign today, Nelson would be mandated to buy her own health insurance by 2014 or face fines. She could buy her policy on an exchange, or marketplace, where she could compare rates. And although she has several pre-existing conditions, insurance companies couldn't deny her coverage.

She is among the 32 million other uninsured Americans the law aims to cover and those who analysts say could benefit most. Critics, however, say the \$940 billion plan doesn't go far enough to cut costs in the system, unfairly taxes families making more than \$250,000 and imposes penalties on businesses all while still leaving some 23 million without health insurance.

Nonetheless, more people with coverage, whether it's private or public, means more paying patients, hospital officials say.

"For someone like me who's been in health care as long as I've been, seeing a movement towards universal health care is very special," said Jon Schandler, chief executive of White Plains Hospital Center for nearly 30 years. "I remain concerned about the lack of solution for people who have immigration issues."

About 50 percent of the uninsured in the Lower Hudson Valley are illegal immigrants, according to a Journal News analysis of U.S. Census figures.

The others, about 69,000, are often called the working poor and are people who make too much to qualify for Medicaid, the federal/state insurance program for low-income people. Either they can't afford to or refuse to buy their own health insurance.

In addition, the bill doesn't adequately address the issue of tort reform, or reducing the number of malpractice lawsuits, or capping the amount of money damages, Schandler said.

"The tort system is a clear problem that needs to be reformed, and it's a pity this doesn't address it. I hope it is resolved in the future," Schandler said.

Doctors in the area seem divided on this health reform bill, depending on the scope of their practice.

For the 800 members of the Westchester Medical Society who rallied against the bill, news of its passage was particularly painful.

"While the intentions are good, we believe one of the first things you'll see in Westchester is a decrease in access to health care," said the organization's president, Dr. John Stangel, a reproductive endocrinologist in Rye.

Stangel said many local doctors are concerned that insurance payments will continue to drop even further and the area will lose many talented and experienced physicians who will close their practices as a result.

But Dr. Lloyd Hamilton, a Harvard-trained physician who runs a low-cost medical clinic in Nyack, said he's glad the measure passed.

"It didn't go far enough," he said. "But it was the best they could get from the Republicans and the insurance companies."

Hamilton, who has been a physician for more than 50 years, said he would have liked to see a single-payer system passed into law.

He's not sure that the new legislation will do much for the people he treats, generally poor and working-class residents.

"It might put a dent in the larger problem," he said. "But will it help my clinic? I don't know."

Places like Open Door Medical Centers, which cares for low-income and uninsured patients on a sliding scale, stand to benefit from the legislation, said Lindsay Farrell, Open Door's executive director.

"We're very happy about the passage of health care reform. I remember when Nixon tried to do it and when Clinton tried to do it. We think it is really good for low-income people," Farrell said.

"We have heard too many heartbreaking stories."

The health reform plan places a greater value on primary care, which is what Open Door provides.

Most people who get their health insurance through their employer won't see much of an impact. Businesses of more than 50 employees would be required to provide health benefits to full-time workers or face fines. They could qualify for up to 35 percent of the cost to insure the worker immediately and up to 50 percent by 2014.

"Business people here are against it, pure and simple," said Bill Mooney, president of the Westchester County Association, which represents about 600 businesses in industries across the private sector.

"It's an incentive not to grow your business," Mooney said.

And although the government requiring individuals and businesses to buy health insurance isn't popular, overall reform won't work unless everyone buys insurance, said Neil Abitabilo, president of the Northern Metropolitan Hospital Association, or NorMet, which advocates for Hudson Valley Hospitals.

"In the end, we're all paying for it anyway either in the form of higher premiums or higher taxes," Abitabilo said.