

Western Massachusetts

Health Access Network Notes



COMMUNITY PARTNERS, INC.

February 1, 2008

Jones Library – Amherst, MA

STATE PROGRAM AND POLICY NEWS:

Jennifer Chow, Health Care For All

State Budget for FY 2009

Process

1. Governor Patrick releases his budget in January.
2. House releases its budget in mid-spring.
3. Senate releases its budget in late spring.
4. Conference Committee resolves differences between the House and Senate budgets, then sends its reconciled budget to the Governor for signature.

Governor Patrick's budget – released January 23

- Outreach and enrollment grants are level-funded at \$3.5 million. The ACT! Coalition urges everyone to encourage their legislators to support the Governor's recommendation.
- \$869 million is included to provide coverage for Commonwealth Care.
- An Office of Health Equity was created to reduce health disparities, and \$1 million was allocated to fund activities.
- Funding for the Health Care Quality and Cost Council, created by Chapter 58 to explore ways to contain costs and foster quality improvements, was doubled to \$1.9 million.

Health Care Reform

Individual mandate

During 2008, penalties will accrue every month for those who have not complied with the requirement that they have health insurance. On Feb. 4th, the Department of Revenue (DOR) and the Connector Board are convening a hearing to gather testimony about these penalties. They will be accepting testimony about affordability issues and Commonwealth Care.

ACT! Coalition recommendations for Commonwealth Care changes

The ACT! Coalition will recommend the following changes at the Feb. 4th Connector Board hearing:

1. Commonwealth Care coverage should initiate a retroactive start date similar to MassHealth's, to eliminate the current gap in coverage when premium payments are made on time.
2. MassHealth has 45 days to make an eligibility determination. Commonwealth Care has the same 45 days, but it is currently hard to be certain when the 45-day count begins – when the application is initiated, or when it is determined complete. ACT recommends that the starting point for Commonwealth Care's 45-day window be clarified.
3. Some Commonwealth Care members who are auto-assigned to a health plan are having problems because they aren't able to access providers. ACT! is recommending increased flexibility for consumers who need to switch plans in order to access their doctors.

Advocacy News

- Camille Watson of Health Care For All was named a national Consumer Health Advocate of the Year by Families USA at its annual conference in January. She was cited for her outstanding work towards reducing health disparities in Massachusetts.
- The Disparities Action Network (DAN) will host a screening of a documentary called "Worlds Apart" which looks at health disparities among many different populations.
- A new effort to protect prescription drug consumers – the Massachusetts Prescription Reform Coalition – is being spearheaded by Sen. Mark Montigny and coordinated by Lisa Kaplan-Howe of Health Care For All. The coalition has three main priorities – 1) restrict gifts to providers from pharmaceutical representatives; 2) restrict data mining regarding patients' use of medications to target marketing and; 3) to allow physicians to get more objective information on available medications.

2008 Federal Poverty Level Guidelines

This year's updated Federal Poverty Level guidelines (FPL), which establish income eligibility for many health care programs including MassHealth, will be applied to MassHealth members and applicants starting March 1, rather than the traditional April 1. The change will affect eligibility for some people.

Events

- On Feb. 14, Valentine's Day, an event at the Statehouse will recognize the Watch Your Mouth campaign and oral health issues in general. (*No candy will be served.*)
- Health Care For All will hold its annual policy and organizing conference on March 28 in Boxboro.