



Joint Task Force on Rural Health and Medically Underserved Areas

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TASK FORCE RECOMMENDS PRIORITIES TO ADDRESS HEALTHCARE NEEDS OF ILLINOISANS

SPRINGFIELD, IL - The Joint Task Force on Rural Health and Medically Underserved Areas announced its findings and recommendations today during a news conference at the State Capital.

“By conducting public hearings throughout Illinois last year, we were able to hear concerns and study issues of importance to citizens, health care providers, support organizations and all who share the goal of improved access to quality and affordable health care for Illinois’ residents,” said State Senator Deanna Demuzio (D-Carlinville), Co-Chair of the task force.

The task force, which included members from both the Illinois House of Representatives and Illinois Senate, was the number one recommendation of a 2003 Health Care Summit convened by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute and the School of Medicine at Southern Illinois University.

“Too many Illinoisans in rural and underserved areas lack access to quality health care. This bipartisan task force, which resulted from a health care summit co-sponsored by the institute, has fashioned recommendations that will make a positive difference for individuals and families who reside in those areas. We commend the task force members for their work and their commitment, and we look forward to working with them to push adoption of the recommendations by the General Assembly and the Blagojevich administration,” said Mike Lawrence, Director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute.

The task force identified five major priorities for consideration by the 95th General Assembly:

1. Resolve chronic Medicaid provider payment issues, especially the low and slow rates of reimbursement that are crippling health care delivery in many areas.

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2. Increase funding for programs and services authorized by the Rural/Downstate Health Act.
3. Increase basic grants for local public health departments to improve and expand core public health programs and services for rural and medically underserved areas.
4. Increase telemedicine capabilities.
5. Increase access to specialty and sub-specialty care for underserved populations through a combination of more prompt payment, adjusted Medicaid reimbursement, and incentives to specialty providers to serve underserved populations.

“I endorse the efforts of this joint legislative task and believe their recommendations will help us all make substantive progress toward improving health care in the state,” said Dr. J. Kevin Dorsey, Dean and Provost of Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. “I particularly applaud their recommendations on expanding the options for the practice of medicine using telemedicine technology and am appreciative of the increase in the budget for Rural/Downstate Health Act which includes SIU’s Rural Health Initiative, a program that has resulted in our funding more than 90 partnerships in downstate Illinois.”

“Shoring up the Medicaid system should be one of our state’s top priorities,” said State Senator Dale Righter (R-Mattoon). “It will become increasingly difficult to get quality doctors to practice in areas that primarily service Medicaid patients if the state continues to delay its payments. In Illinois we’re seeing a huge jump in the number of uninsured residents, especially in rural areas. We must take concrete steps to ensure quality and affordable health care for individuals with the greatest need.”

In their letter of submittal to the Governor and House and Senate leadership, task force members emphasized the importance of funding to address long-standing deficits in rural and medically underserved areas. Noting the state’s current budget pressures, the members recommended a strategic phased-in schedule to fund the priorities if they cannot be implemented immediately to address the critical healthcare needs throughout the state.

"These are critical issues," said State Representative John E. Bradley (D-Marion). "I intend to work for implementation in the House to help realize the commitment of Paul Simon to the people of rural and medically underserved areas. I am especially concerned about the shortage of medical specialists in Southern Illinois, such as pediatric psychiatry."

“I feel strongly that these recommendations will help to address the issues facing Illinois residents living in rural and underserved areas,” said Senator Dan Rutherford (R-Pontiac). “Because the state will be required to make a long-term commitment to fulfill all of the recommendations, I encourage the General Assembly to act quickly, ensuring that an appropriate phase-in program can be established to address these problems.”

The full report submitted by the task force, which includes detailed recommendations, participant and testimony information may be found on the Illinois General Assembly website at www.ilga.gov/reports/specialreports.asp.

“As Co-Chairman of this taskforce, I will work to ensure the recommendations made will be a priority in the 95th General Assembly,” said State Senator William Delgado (D-Chicago). “The healthcare of Illinoisans should be one of our main priorities and providing additional resources to rural and underserved areas across Illinois is a step in the right direction.”

Task Force members include: State Representative John Bradley (D-Marion), State Representative Rich Brauer (R-Springfield), State Representative Patricia R. Bellock (R-Westmont), State Senator Dan Rutherford (R-Pontiac), State Senator Dale A. Righter (R-Mattoon), State Senator James F. Clayborne, Jr. (D-Belleville) and Co-Chairs, State Senator William Delgado (D-Chicago) and State Senator Deanna Demuzio (D-Carlinville).

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