

Health reforms call for clinics, local hospitals

Blueprint wants LSU to run only four charity hospitals
by Richard A. Webster

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Let the money follow the patient.

Blueprint Louisiana, a nonprofit government reform group, believes this is the key to rehabilitating the state's health care system, and it plans to hold legislators accountable if they fail to act.

"What we do real well in this state is come up with fairly good ideas," said Dr. Phillip Rozeman, a Shreveport cardiologist and a member of the Blueprint steering committee. "What we don't do well is implement those ideas. But within the Blueprint plan is political muscle. This is a campaign and money will be spent to get everybody on the same page."

Blueprint Louisiana is lobbying all state-elected officials to commit to a five-point plan based on improved ethics, health care and education reform, work force development and improved transportation infrastructure. The group has asked all members of the Legislature to sign contracts agreeing to work to implement their proposals.

Sean Reilly, president of the outdoor division for Lamar Advertising Co. in Baton Rouge and a member of the Blueprint steering committee, said allowing the money to follow the patient means creating primary care clinics and hospitals within communities so people don't have to depend on the charity hospital system.

"This is how it works in other states and it works better at extending the reach of primary and preventive care," Reilly said. "This represents a true departure of where we've been and an opportunity to fundamentally change the trajectory of health care in the state."

The Blueprint health care proposal is largely based on a pair of state-financed reports by Price Waterhouse Coopers and the Public Affairs Research Council, which examined the Louisiana health care system and recommended improvements.

The plan has six main initiatives:

- redirect some of the \$1 billion in federal funds now sent largely to the state-run charity hospitals to private hospitals, local clinics and doctors;
- reduce the number of state hospitals overseen by Louisiana State University from 10 to four so LSU can focus on medical education and research;
- customize care for the uninsured by allowing communities to decide what will work best for their region;
- expand coverage for low-income parents by raising eligibility limits to include an extra 100,000 parents for Medicaid benefits;
- offer LSU students Medicare training by employing them at private hospitals, which will allow the state to collect an additional \$160 million in federal funds annually; and
- enhance accountability in state health care spending.

Gary Muller, president and CEO of West Jefferson Medical Center, said reaction to the Blueprint proposal within the medical community has been positive.

"This will allow patients to get access to care through multiple places rather than the old model where they got care at Charity if they didn't have funds," Muller said. "Don't do what we did before. That's the bottom line. Do something like this that's different and better for the patient."

Dr. Mark Peters, CEO and president of East Jefferson General Hospital, supports the Blueprint health care proposal but said scaling back the number of charity hospitals under LSU control and focusing on neighborhood clinics could be controversial.

"So many times when anyone starts talking about money following the patient they think that's a negative LSU statement but it isn't," Peters said. "The hospital community sees the significant importance of LSU and the need for it to succeed. But the question is how can they exceed more effectively in the future and that's the issue at hand."

Dennis Stine, president of Stine Lumber in Sulphur and a member of Blueprint Louisiana, said the debate is nothing new in Louisiana. Through the Blueprint initiative, they are hoping to affect a different outcome.

"I was in the Legislature in the '80s and worked with Gov. Roemer on these same issues and nothing got done," Stine said. "When a legislator gets elected and the person of little means

comes to them and says, 'Whatever you do, don't do away with my Charity hospital. I need that care,' the legislator reacts to that."

Rozeman said legislators who ignore Blueprint ideas and refuse to sign the contract will face a campaign publicizing the positions of politicians refusing to reform ethics, health care, education, labor and transportation.

"This is simply stating that you think mom and apple pie is a good thing and that you as a legislator want to move mom and apple pie forward and you're committed to do that," Rozeman said. "You'll have a lot of explaining to do to your constituents if you don't sign on for mom and apple pie." •