



CEOs: Health care situation in dire straits

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Now is the time to fix Louisiana's health care situation, and if the state doesn't take advantage of the havoc wreaked by Hurricane Katrina, it may never be done, two Alexandria hospital officials said Tuesday.

Stephen Wright, Christus St. Frances Cabrini Hospital's regional chief executive officer, and A.C. Buchanan, Rapides Regional Medical Center's chief executive officer, made the remarks before the Downtown Alexandria Rotary Club.

Among things needing to be fixed, Wright said, are 43 percent of the population without health insurance and the state's extraordinarily high rate of emergency-room visits. The two, he said, go hand in hand.

In Louisiana, 550 per 1,000 patients make emergency room visits while the national average is 350. And many of those patients are using emergency rooms as primary health care. "It's an expensive proposition," he said.

Buchanan concentrated his remarks on Huey P. Long Medical Center. He said aside from the hospital's poor physical shape and insufficient state budget, there are fewer and fewer patients each year. And that affects LSU and Tulane graduate medical education.

That, Wright explained, means that health care dollars are being diverted to medical education.

Furthermore, Buchanan said, 72 percent of the census comes through the emergency room in the state-run charity hospitals, as compared to 40 percent in the private hospitals.

Wright said another problem is inadequate payments to hospitals for Medicaid and Medicare which means the costs are shifted to private insurance and private pay.

Buchanan said another problem is the uninsured who go to hospitals elsewhere. About 40 percent from Central Louisiana go to Shreveport, he said.

Both expressed hope that the Louisiana Recovery Authority, formed to address all the problems of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, will follow through on its conclusion, also reached by the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana, to look at different models of health care.

Among the criteria they are looking at are quality, primary care, choice afforded to the indigent, graduate medical education, LSU management of the charity hospital system, use of electronic medical records, utilization of private sector space and utilizing a public/private sector effort.

"The opportunity has never been better," Buchanan said. And, he said, the Louisiana Recovery Authority has spent a lot of time thinking about that.

Deborah Randolph, a health care lobbyist, said she would encourage Wright and Buchanan to continue educating citizens.

"I'd like to see these two speaking to every civic group in the area," she said. "We are truly at a crossroad due to the infrastructure being wiped out. We are seeing a decline in the number of services available."

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