

Shapleigh proposes universal health care

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AUSTIN -- El Paso has more uninsured people than any American city its size, and the time has come for Texas to provide universal health care, said state Sen. Eliot Shapleigh at a news conference Monday.

"When I go to my district, this is the number one issue middle class Texans ask me about, 'What am I going to do to maintain my health insurance?'" Shapleigh, D-El Paso, said.

Shapleigh has proposed a bill that would create a single payer system that would use a private delivery system to provide health care. The savings from reduced administrative costs will pay for those individuals that are uninsured, Shapleigh said.

Administration costs account for 31 percent of market driven health-care administrative costs, but only 3.6 percent of costs for the government's Medicare program, Shapleigh said. Americans spend \$98 billion in excess health care administrative costs--marketing, underwriting and denying claims, he said.

"Medical care is now a zero sum game when the money we pay is tied up in passing around the bill rather than paying for direct costs," Shapleigh said.

El Paso pediatrician Dr. Jose D. Alva said he would support a proposal for universal coverage as long as the government did not try to provide medical care.

"They're not doctors," Alva said. "Doctors have to run the show."

Universal coverage should not be the goal of the health-care system, said Mary Katherine Stout, director of the Center for Health Care Policy for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. When the government is responsible for funding health care, decisions become highly politicized and care is rationed, which has been the case in many other countries, Stout said.

"You insulate the health care system from competition," Stout said.

Emergency room care is far more expensive than primary care, said Dr. Amina Haji, the Austin Chair of Health Care for All Texas, at the conference. Some uninsured patients use the emergency room when primary care would have saved costs, and others avoid care until the disease has gotten worse and they may not be able to recover.

"Our emergency rooms are becoming primary care clinics for uninsured people," Haji said.

Shapleigh's bill has been assigned to the Senate State Affairs Committee, but a hearing has not been scheduled.

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