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Panel's goal: Health care for everyone

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By [Diana Heil](#) | The Santa Fe New Mexican
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Alana Benjamin, a fourth-year medical school student, is unabashedly idealistic. She says she wants health care equity and justice for all by the time she becomes a real doctor.

While doing clinical rotations at University Hospital in Albuquerque, she has seen needless suffering and extra costs directly related to the fact that New Mexico has the second highest rate of uninsured residents in the nation.

"I want it to change before I actually become a doctor," she told the Health Coverage for New Mexicans Committee on Wednesday at the state Capitol. "I don't want to postpone procedures for my patients because they don't have health insurance."

By the 2008 legislative session, the committee is supposed to have researched as many as five models, with the help of national experts, and drafted a recommendation. The goal is to provide health coverage for all people living in New Mexico, regardless of their ability to pay or their health status.

The 27-member committee, which was appointed by Gov. Bill Richardson and leaders in the Legislature, is in the early stages of the process. It has left the debate open to different types of models, some which would not require additional public funding. Cost estimates will be run on each model.

Benjamin received applause after telling the story of a 40-year-old man who couldn't afford gall bladder surgery and found himself in critical condition months later because his condition went untreated. After two weeks in the hospital, he managed to live. Now he's faced with more than \$1 million dollars in bills, Benjamin said.

About 15 of Benjamin's colleagues from medical school also attended the meeting. Mostly health care workers and members of health care reform groups took advantage of the public comment period Wednesday.

Bill Jordan, deputy director of New Mexico Voices for Children, said the committee needs to find a solution that is truly workable and universal. He's in favor of a model that does not hold employers responsible for providing health insurance. He said America has an ingrained way of doing things that would outrage companies in other countries that offer socialized medicine.

Meanwhile, the committee is trying to get a grasp on what's happening with health care spending now. A 2004 legislative study gives some indications, but committee members question the accuracy of some numbers. A revision is under way.

In 2002, providing health care to New Mexicans cost an estimated \$7.8 billion.

The federal government paid 64 percent of that. The state and counties paid 11 percent. The

rest came from private sources, including fully insured plans and self-insured plans.

Following where the money went was hard to do because there weren't good ways to collect data, such as the amount of money hospitals spent on uninsured patients or the impact of Medicaid spending cuts by the state.

For about 29 percent of total health care spending in 2002, researchers could not be sure where the money went. The report traced the biggest chunk -- 25 percent -- to insurance agencies, and 20 percent to hospitals.

The cost of training doctors and nurses was not included in the study.

Human Services Secretary Pam Hyde, who is vice-chairwoman of the committee, said the report's conclusions cannot be taken as "the gospel truth." "It's what the data allows us to say at this point," she said.

In 2004, the cost of providing health care to New Mexicans was \$9.5 billion, according to a more recent estimate.

State Rep. John Heaton, D-Carlsbad, pushed for a better set of facts. "It's really hard to hang your hat on the statistics we're getting because nobody knows what they mean," he said. "... It's a struggle to come up with answers when we don't know what the facts are."

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