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Organizations to spark community discussions on health care

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The future of health care lies somewhere along a path littered with choices.

Will a universal health care system be instated? Will concerns regarding an approaching economic recession come to be founded and limit the resources available to clinics and patients?

It may feel like there isn't much one can do other than wait for circumstances to play out and legislatures to push their decisions, but a partnership of regional organizations wants to not only help the community learn more about how future health care choices may affect them, but also give people a voice as to what they would like to see happen in Western New York.

"Reaching for Excellence: Community Vision and Voices for Western New York Health Care," is a collaboration of organizations, sponsored by the Community Health Foundation of Western & Central New York and the John R. Oishei Foundation, that seeks to engage Western New Yorkers in exploring the possibilities of regional health care and setting goals to strengthen that system toward the needs of its people.

According to Ann Monroe, president of the Community Health Foundation, the need for an organized source of information and communication for the area was first noticed when the state "Berger Commission" on health care released its recommendations for facilities.

"This particular project ... was triggered when the Berger Commission report came out and there seemed to be so little information about where we were going in health care," Monroe said. "So you couldn't even evaluate if that report was a good idea or not because there was nothing really said about where we, in Western New York, are wanting to go with health care."

Reaching for Excellence wishes to hold a series of community meetings and hearings — ideally, in smaller groups in which everyone can be encouraged to and have an opportunity to speak their minds.

The first program in the project, entitled "One Friday, Four Futures," has been designed to encourage conversation about how possible future configurations of regional health care could serve as a benefit or detriment to people with differing needs.

Leaders from local and regional health and community organizations worked together throughout last summer to create four different health system scenarios ranging from a

series of recessions without any sort of health care reform to Congress passing a universal health care program. Each scenario has been presented in short story format, taking place 10 years from now, in order to compare the general facets of each system. A chart also provides an overview of who could benefit and who could struggle in each case.

The scenarios are meant to serve as a springboard for discussions into what community members would most like to see out of a Western New York health care system. These opinions will be studied and compiled into a report which is then expected to be serve as a platform to address government representatives and other influential parties.

“A big piece of this is to get enough input from communities that those of us who are committed to action and to continuing the fight will have more tools to do that,” Monroe said.

“One Friday, Four Futures” is meant to be accessible to almost all community members. In addition to booklet format, the scenarios and information are also available on CD. Spanish materials and Spanish-speaking meeting facilitators are also available. Discussions can be scheduled by any sort of group, including municipalities, churches and clubs, and will be organized and led for free by the facilitators.

While discussions in various parts of the region are expected to naturally revolve around the local health care system, Chautauqua County Health Network Executive Director Ann Morse Abdella noted that the most strength expected from the program will likely come from the combined voices of all in Western New York.

“It’s not just about Brooks Hospital in this process; it’s about the region,” she said. “Brooks can’t do it on its own anymore. Lakeshore can’t do it on its own anymore. We have got to come together if we’re going to try to get our arms around this and make meaningful change.

“That’s what’s powerful about the eight counties coming together, because now you have a critical mass of people. You’ve got a system that’s built to serve the whole region and if we get enough people with enough meaningful input into that process, then we can make some recommendations and get about the business of how do we tinker with the system to change it to make it better.”

A number of facilitators have been trained to lead the “One Friday, Four Futures” discussions and come from organizations throughout the region, including local representatives from the Chautauqua County Health Network and Healthy Community Alliance, among others. Any group or organization who is interested in hosting a discussion is encouraged to contact Reaching for Excellence by calling 829-3777 or visiting their Web site at [www.rx4excellence.org](http://www.rx4excellence.org).

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