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Universal health care not in cards

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A special commission studying gaps in Washington's health care system is expected to recommend a more modest approach than other states, shying away from trying to cover all residents with health insurance immediately.

Left out of the commission's pending report "are some things I'd like to see in there - like universal health care," said state

Sen. Pat Thibaudeau, the Seattle Democrat who is a leader of the commission. "We did say our goal is to cover all children by 2010 and all Washingtonians by 2012."

Most details of the unreleased report have been kept secret, and Thibaudeau spoke only in general terms last week of the effort to address the needs of the uninsured, who number 595,000 in Washington. Thibaudeau described a remedy that is much less ambitious than in Massachusetts, which requires individuals to get insurance.

And it is far less ambitious than the universal coverage that an Oregon Senate commission recommended earlier this month to that state's legislature.

"It was a consensus document," Thibaudeau said of the bipartisan effort that included legislators who listened to what interest groups had to say. "We didn't vote on anything. We tried to take into account everybody's point of view and reflect it in the report."

The Blue Ribbon Commission on Health Care Costs and Access also included Insurance Commissioner Mike Kreidler and leaders of state agencies that provide health services.

The five-year plan for improving health care access is being prepared for Gov. Chris Gregoire's release to the Legislature next month. The governor, a Democrat who often says the federal government should help solve health care access problems, also was a leader of the commission, but was on vacation and unavailable to comment.

Gregoire's budget request for 2007 adds health insurance coverage for 32,000 more uninsured children, but it leaves little obvious room for major outlays on health care.

Some participants say the final report will carry even more modest recommendations than what Thibaudeau outlined. However, the report will call for making health insurance available to all of the state's children by 2010, Kreidler, the insurance commissioner, said Friday.

It also sets a soft goal - though clearly not an expectation - of making health care or insurance more available to all other Washingtonians by 2012, Kreidler said. He predicted that the commission's various strategies might cut the uninsured in half in Washington, from 12 percent to 6 percent, putting the state ahead of most other states.

Republican Rep. Bill Hinkle of Cle Elum, who served on the commission, said the report focuses on four main strategy areas - including a search for ways to get affordable health insurance options to small businesses and individuals. That

could include fewer requirements on insurers or options for more bare bones insurance offerings, if Hinkle and those sharing his philosophical outlook get their way.

Already, Kreidler has been asked to put together a report to show how fewer restrictions on insurance coverage might lead to lower-cost policy options. He also has been asked to carry out other studies to help policymakers.

Overall, Hinkle said, the report commits the state to a health care system that recognizes and requires use of "evidence-based medicine" - in other words, care that is proven effective. It also calls on the state to promote illness-prevention strategies and healthful lifestyles; to better manage chronic illnesses; and to give better information to consumers about health care costs and quality.

He said there also is talk of using some kind of "connector" organizations, which Massachusetts is pioneering, to link consumers and businesses with providers of health care insurance.

"I think the idea that everyone would be covered is a shot above what we were trying to do," Hinkle said. "We had a five-year plan to make health care more affordable and accessible. But as far as insuring everybody there is a certain portion of young immortals, it will be difficult to get them insured. They choose not to."

Some activists expected the commission to fall short of an aggressive plan for covering all residents. "I think they'll be too timid to really tackle the problem of the uninsured," said Joshua Welter, organizing director for Washington CAN!, an advocacy group formerly known as Citizen Action. "We're hopeful the legislative leadership will be willing to entertain broader, comprehensive proposals that really get at the problem of the uninsured and underinsured."

House Speaker Frank Chopp, D-Seattle, laid out the 2010 goal for covering all children three years ago, and the Legislature has worked toward it since then.

Carolyn Logue, state director of the National Federation of Independent Business, said her group is following the commission's work. She hopes it embraces the idea that small businesses and individuals should have more choices, including the option of cheaper "bare bones" insurance policies that cover catastrophes.

Logue said the commission is taking a more careful look at health care problems than what Democrats did in 1993; that was when businesses were ordered to provide health care coverage for workers, only to see the requirement repealed. By contrast, the commission is charting a plan that thoughtfully puts "one or two things in place at a time and see if it works," Logue said.

"The devil is in the details on that. Everyone would love to have everyone covered with health insurance," Logue said. "You'll get there if people are willing to listen to each other and work in a bipartisan manner. We're willing to listen to any option; they don't want a full-blown just go to the government and get your health care."

No date has been announced for the report's release. And no deadlines for action are set for the Legislature, Thibaudeau said. On the Web

For details on work by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Health Care, go to www1.leg.wa.gov/Joint/Committees/HCCA/