

Healthy advice Outreach workers making sure people know of new law



Debbie Varrs (left), Rosina Belcourt (with clipboard), and Lisa Vinikoor, all with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, spoke with Chricton Shallow as they canvassed Evelyn Street in Mattapan on Thursday to make sure people are aware of their options under the state's new mandatory health insurance law.

By Alice Dembner, Globe Staff | July 7, 2007

Crichton Shallow had seen the television ads about the state's new health insurance requirement. But it wasn't until outreach workers came to his Mattapan door Thursday that he took the first step toward getting covered.

"What exactly do I need to do?" he asked the threesome from the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization who were canvassing Evelyn Street.

As they walked Shallow through the process, the outreach workers suggested that he could probably get state-subsidized insurance for about \$105 a month.

"I could make that," said Shallow, 57, a grin spreading across his stubbled face. A recent immigrant from St. Vincent and the Grenadines who works construction jobs when he can find them, Shallow was the latest recruit as the state works to get 200,000 to 300,000 more people insured.

Getting the word out is half the battle, and the state is well into a \$3 million media campaign that has already targeted Red Sox fans and will hit the radio waves on Monday from Cape Cod to Springfield.

But dozens of groups across the state are taking a more personal approach, reaching people in their homes, their favorite restaurants, their health centers, and their churches and helping them sign up.

The Legislature approved \$3.5 million this week to help fund this grass-roots effort, far more than the \$500,000 Governor Deval L. Patrick had proposed in his budget.

Yesterday, the governor's press secretary, Kyle Sullivan, hinted that the governor would not veto the funding. "While final decisions have not been made on possible vetoes, this administration is committed to making healthcare reform a success," he said. "Therefore, we are inclined to support this measure."

Advocates said outreach is crucial this year, because every adult must have insurance by December. If they don't and if the state determines that insurance was affordable for them, they will be fined \$219 next year. The penalty increases substantially in 2009.

"It's critical that the higher-level advertising and marketing be matched by boots on the ground helping individuals through the process of understanding their choices and actually enrolling in coverage," said John McDonough, executive director of Health Care for All, an advocacy group that helped get the new healthcare law passed in April 2006 and that has received a state outreach grant.

To provide more insurance options, the state has expanded eligibility for Medicaid, created a new subsidized insurance program, and commissioned new coverage plans from insurers, some of which have lower than market

premiums. In addition, businesses with 11 or more full-time equivalent employees are required to provide insurance to at least 25 percent of full-time workers or pay a penalty.

The thrust of the law has been conveyed in the media and through an advertising campaign by the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority, which oversees implementation of the law and is signing up people for insurance. At least 135,000 people have already obtained free or subsidized coverage.

But a recent poll conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that 38 percent of Massachusetts residents still know little or nothing about the law.

A second phase of the campaign begins Monday with ads on sports and news radio stations, such as WEEI and WBZ, as well as on rock and ethnic radio stations, according to Joan Fallon, director of public education for the Connector Authority.

Meanwhile, hospitals, health centers, advocacy groups and local ethnic agencies are serving as the law's sales force.

Community Action of the Franklin, Hampshire, and North Quabbin Regions, for example, has encouraged restaurants to use placemats printed with health insurance facts. Great Brook Valley Health Center in Worcester hired a worker to approach people coming to the center's pharmacy. The Vietnamese-American Civic Association in Dorchester published brochures in Vietnamese and hired staff to help people apply for insurance.

The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization -- a coalition of 65 religious congregations, labor unions, and community groups -- is going door to door in Boston neighborhoods. In the last three weeks, they have knocked on more than 465 doors, left leaflets explaining the law, and talked with 145 individuals, according to organizer Lisa Vinikoor. The effort is funded by membership dues and by a grant from Massachusetts General Hospital.

Thursday evening, Vinikoor and volunteer Debbie Varrs greeted Abdurrahim Gray as he chatted with a friend on his front stoop.

"It's a must," Varrs said, explaining the insurance law.

Gray works two part-time jobs, neither of which offer him insurance. He knew about the law, but even though his low income might qualify him for fully subsidized insurance, he hadn't yet applied.

"Since you care so much," he told Varrs and Vinikoor, "I'll call the number" to enroll.

Resources

- Health Care for All Helpline: 800-272-4232.
- Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority: 877-623-6765 or mahealthconnector.org.
- GetHealthCoverage.net, for information on health insurance options.

For the Globe's coverage, see boston.com/yourlife/health/other/articles/2007/06/18/countdown_to_coverage ■