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Promises to watch

By Eileen McNamara, Globe Columnist | April 5, 2006

Trust but verify.

Proponents of universal healthcare should adopt that Reagan-era maxim as they celebrate legislative approval of a bill to expand access to medical coverage to most of the uninsured in Massachusetts.

Maybe the plan approved by the House and Senate yesterday really will provide affordable, comprehensive healthcare coverage to the state's 532,000 uninsured within the next three years. But it would be a mistake for grass-roots organizers to abandon the ballot initiative that will put the demand for universal healthcare in the hands of state voters in November.

Without the pressure of that impending vote, the promised reforms might never materialize. It has happened before.

House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi was not entirely accurate when, in the flush of the 152-2 House vote, he said it was too soon to know if the healthcare bill was perfect, "because it's never been done before." It has been done before, in 1988, when there was a rally no less noisy and optimistic than the one held yesterday in Nurses Hall at the State House. But the universal healthcare bill signed by Governor Michael S. Dukakis with such fanfare that year was never implemented because it was never funded.

Senator Mark C. Montigny, a Democrat from New Bedford, has a longer memory than the speaker, and Montigny struck an appropriately cautionary note in addressing a coalition of religious, labor, and healthcare providers whose organizing and lobbying efforts were instrumental in the passage of this bill. "I have been around a long time on this issue, and every time we have advanced, we have been in danger of slipping backward," he said. "If we don't keep our eye on the ball, it will happen again."

The reason, as always, is money.

The legislation headed for Governor Mitt Romney's desk is to be paid for through a combination of federal reimbursements, state funds, new assessments on businesses that do not provide health insurance as a benefit of employment, and a requirement that all residents of Massachusetts buy health insurance or face financial penalties. The state promises to provide subsidies on a sliding scale to those who cannot afford to purchase insurance on their own. How many people will need subsidies and how much those subsidies will cost is not yet certain.

Without a permanently earmarked source of revenue -- a hike in the cigarette tax, say, or income from proposed slot machines at Massachusetts racetracks -- what assurance do we have that the state will continue to subsidize healthcare for the poor if the economy falters and tax revenues slide? If the budget needs balancing, will there be calls to "cut the healthcare rolls," as there were once calls to "cut the welfare rolls?"

The Rev. Hurmon Hamilton, pastor of Roxbury Presbyterian Church and president of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, urged the celebratory crowd to bask in its legislative victory but to recognize that complacency could undermine its efforts in the long term. "We will stay focused on this issue until every ambiguity has been clarified. We will celebrate tonight, but we will continue to fight tomorrow," he said.

Because this is Massachusetts, there will be disagreements among advocates for healthcare reform about the need to press forward with the ballot initiative in November. Should they accept the legislation drafted by the House and Senate conference committee as the best that can be done or press for more from the voters through the ballot initiative?

"It is too soon to talk about that now," demurred Rabbi Jonah D. Pesner of Temple Israel in Boston and the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization. "Today is a great beginning. . . . We should take today to celebrate."

Tomorrow night, members of the interfaith group have a meeting scheduled at Roxbury Presbyterian Church. The agenda outlined on the flier being distributed yesterday? To begin to answer the question that still looms: "Health Care: What Next?"

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