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Hagan gets input on health care

Senator prepares for upcoming debate

By **JESSICA GOODMAN**
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North Carolina Sen. Kay Hagan met with seven health care professionals Saturday morning at Pardee Hospital to gather information as health care reform legislation heads to the Senate. Debate on a health care bill is expected to start next week.

Hagan, a Democrat from Greensboro, has said she supports health care reform but wants to closely examine the bill first. There are three must-haves that she will be looking for.



Hagan

The first is the ability of people to have affordable, easy access to a primary care physician, or a "medical home" they can go to for regular care. People with insurance go to a regular physician, or medical home, and Hagan said everyone needs to have that opportunity.

She also stressed the need for affordable insurance coverage for all — including covering people with pre-existing conditions — and to not increase the deficit.

"North Carolina is really on the cutting edge of these medical homes," said Hagan.

The health care professionals, a mix of doctors and directors of health care organizations in Western North Carolina, pointed out how WNC has been on the forefront of increasing conversations between institutes to better serve the community. Hagan wanted to address how to make rural doctor's offices less isolated, as hi-tech components may be slow in coming to more rural areas.

Harold Moore, Pardee's chief information officer, explained the WNC Data Link program, an electronic exchange of information about patients between 16 hospitals in WNC that keeps them from becoming isolated.

Hagan added that cross-communication can help save money by reducing medical errors and duplication in treatments. She stressed it's a need nationwide to share information about patients.

"We certainly don't want to destroy what's going on here," Hagan said.

Jennifer Henderson, executive director of Blue Ridge Community Health Services, talked about how her organization helps serve the under- or uninsured in Western North Carolina. Hagan estimated there's about 185,000 uninsured people in Western North Carolina and 16,000 uninsured in Henderson County.

"Our center has one of the highest rates," said Henderson.

She estimated about 70 percent of her clients seen are uninsured and talked about the cost of treating such patients. Hagan noted that one visit to the ER costs the same as treating a patient for a year at Blue Ridge Community Health Services. Preventive treatment could keep patients from the ER altogether, she added.

The ER is also treating the uninsured for problems that would be handled by primary care physicians if they had insurance.

In 1998 a premium for health insurance for a family of four was \$6,000. Today it's up to \$12,000. By

HAGAN

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2016, it will be around \$24,000.

Current health care costs are "out of line with what people can afford," Hagan said.

She also wants health care reform to address the growing problem of preventing chronic conditions.

"So much of our diabetes now is linked to obesity," Hagan added.

She referenced Safeway's Wellness Program, which gave employees discounts for participating in a wellness program. Hagan stressed this would be something to add to employer-sponsored health care, including a 20 percent discount for employees who maintain a wellness program.

"If you can give people money in their pocket, they will change behavior," Hagan added.

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