

Health is Local touts community perspective

By Drew Setterholm Daily Press Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, March 9, 2014 1:00 am

A Colorado organization is working to break down the national health care reform conversation by taking a closer look at communities — Montrose included.

The Colorado Coalition for the Medically Underserved launched a website, HealthisLocal.org, about two weeks ago. The site is a cross between an information hub and a public forum, intended to keep stakeholders and policymakers up to date and the public engaged with people-centric stories of change.

The project, Health is Local, morphed out of a previous CCMU undertaking, called Coloardo HealthStory. More than 250 personal interviews were conducted on the state of health and health care in Colorado.

With the same ethic in mind, CCMU formed its new project, Health is Local, which will study four Colorado communities over the course of a year to foster an understanding of how national health care reform affects real people.

Montrose County will serve as one study area, along with Summit and Yuma counties and the city of Colorado Springs.

“One of the things we’ve really identified as a priority is to get some understanding of what’s happening with health reform at the local level before we get any sort of real quantitative data back from the state and national organizations,” Joe Sammen, CCMU director of community initiatives, said.

The four communities were chosen to show the diversity of communities across the state, Sammen said. The website features each area individually, with key leaders funneling “impact” information back to CCMU.

Periodic interviews with residents are being added to compliment raw information with personal opinions and experiences.

Through previous projects, Sammen explained, “We really understood the power of asking the people on the ground what’s happening, asking for qualitative data and narratives of change in local communities.”

Lynn Borup, assistant director of Tri-County Health Network, was identified by CCMU as a local leader and is working in partnership with the coalition to provide feedback and data. For Borup, the project is emphasizing the right kind of information.

“I think it’s very true that health is local, and there are different perceptions even within communities,” Borup said. “There’s a lot of new information, there’s a lot of great information and there’s a lot of confusing information. Talking about it and seeing how it relates specifically to personal situations is huge. ... It’s important to hear what people are thinking.”

Borup sees several issues in the health care arena that could continue to cause changes in the Montrose area through the next year and beyond. The state’s expansion of Medicaid eligibility, for example, has resulted in more Medicaid patients; whether there will be enough physicians to handle those patients is a community discussion that needs to take place, she explained.

While some of Montrose’s population might be sitting back, hoping an administrative change at the federal level will halt or reverse the health reform rollout, Borup said, others are ready to take action to localize the reform.

“I think there’s a number of really concerned community members who are trying to be proactive in figuring out how the change should affect them, versus waiting for the change to affect them,” she said.

Fostering that conversation is precisely what CCMU set out to accomplish — breaking down a national issue to local conversations.

“Our mission is to make the health care system a better place, broadly, in Colorado,” Sammen said. “We believe there are all sorts of ways to do that. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a national or a state policy that drives that change. “

Sammen explained the site was originally intended to cater to local policymakers and provide information for informed decisions. Since its launch, though, CCMU has seen a different response than it anticipated.

“The reach of the site has been dramatic. I think we’ve hit 35 states already from people accessing the site. There’s folks who have accessed it from Canada and France and Australia. ... I think there’s a buzz about the project,” Sammen said.

With continued interest, Sammen said, the site could become a “guidepost for health reform” and a key indicator of how federal policies and state regulations are playing out in real time with real people.

The website can be found at www.healthislocal.org and has links to Montrose’s information and CCMU’s home site.