



## Alabama's health care crisis: Task force looks to lower costs, expand services in rural areas

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Alabama Gov. Robert Bentley has given a group of nearly 40 health care professionals and lawmakers the daunting task of fixing the state's health care crisis.

**Alabama Health Care Improvement Task Force's** mission is to identify real ways to make health care accessible and affordable to everyone while also combating the shortage of primary care physicians in 65 or the state's 67 counties.

At the same time, 65 percent of the state's rural hospitals are losing money, and many of the state's residents are suffering from chronic health problems, said State Health Officer Don Williamson, who chairs the 37-member committee.

What the task force does may be meaningless, though, if state lawmakers don't adequately **fund Medicaid**, he told task force members at its inaugural meeting Wednesday.

A mix of state, federal and hospital funding supports Medicaid, which provides health insurance to more than 1 million Alabamians.

The governor has requested a General Fund appropriation of \$795 million for Medicaid in 2016, a \$110 million increase over this year. Williamson said a 3 percent cut as shown in the draft budget could end the viability of Medicaid in the state.

And, when looking at the state's health care problems, he pointed out poverty is a bigger risk factor for chronic health issues than tobacco use or overeating.

More than 1 in 6 Alabamians live in poverty, Census data shows.

Most task force members seem to agree on the challenges at hand, but how to fix them may be another question altogether.

"It's serious and it's important and we can't be bogged down by the turf wars," Bentley told the task force on Wednesday. "We can't be bogged down by the federal government. We can't be bogged down by anything except the concern we have in our hearts for those we serve."

The task force is expected to work on reform for the next three years, and Bentley expects the group to bring him

ideas for policy changes by the 2016 legislative session.

Improving access to health care to residents of Alabama especially in the more rural parts of the state is a priority for Jeff Brannon, chief executive officer of Monroe County Hospital, and Will Ferniany, CEO of UAB Health Systems. That includes the recruitment and retention of primary care physicians.

Educating residents on the importance of eating better, exercising and utilizing primary care clinics instead of the emergency room are key issues for Brannon as well.

Monroe County Hospital is the only hospital providing care for the county's 23,000 residents, he said, and there is a shortage of primary care physicians. Three years ago, the county has 13 primary care physicians; now it has nine.

Medical programs at University of Alabama and Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine have opened up spots for those seeking to practice in rural parts of the state. Many medical students are completing their degrees in Tuscaloosa, Montgomery or Dothan with the intent of them working in rural parts of the state.

In some cases, future physicians are having their tuition paid for if they agree to practice in rural parts of the state for a set length of time.

Ferniany said the task force also needs to look at expanding the scope of practice for nurse practitioners and physician assistants. State law would need to be changed to give these professionals the ability to treat more patients.

Brannon said the goal of the task force is improving the overall health of the resident, and they must discuss the health issues facing its residents like diabetes, obesity and heart disease.

Telemedicine - using a secure and encrypted network to teleconference with patients in real time -- is being used in a limited way across Alabama. Bentley, who is a dermatologist, and other health care professionals said this technology can be used by a variety of specialists to provide care to patients in rural Alabama.

**Medical AIDS Outreach** is successfully using telemedicine to reach hundreds of patients.

James Tucker, director of Alabama Disabilities Advocacy Program, sees delivery of care as one of the group's focuses. He suggests expanding the use of certified peer specialists - non-health care professionals -- who are trained to identify serious mental and physical issues and can determine if someone really needs to make a trip to the emergency room or not.

"This is an example of better directed and more economically efficient care so you get a good patient outcome and you do it at a reasonable rate of cost, he said.

He said this service would work well with newly formed Regional Care Organizations treating those on Medicaid.

Richard Craig, executive director, JBS Mental Health Authority, also suggested expanding this training and certification into rural parts of Alabama. He said this training is valuable for teachers, police officers and workers at

homeless shelters.

He echoes the need for more medical providers in the state.

"Bringing health providers and health care availability to rural Alabama is going to be a very important mission of this task force," Craig said.

He said the closure of Chilton County's only hospital - Clanton Medical Center in 2012 - is causing patients to drive 30 minutes or even an hour away for certain medical services.

"That is just the tip of the iceberg for the potential for the state if rural hospitals start failing and close around the state," Craig said. "That's not a good thing."

Since many hospitals are failing, Williamson has suggested that some rural hospitals may have to look at changing their model and doing things differently.

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