

Nathan Challenges Community on Health Care Crisis

On Thursday night, April 10, at the Sanibel Community Association, islanders heard a compelling presentation by Jim Nathan, president and CEO of Lee Memorial Health System, on the health care crisis facing this country, and Southwest Florida in particular.

Starting with a “perfect storm” metaphor, Nathan traced the historic forces affecting health care delivery and payment in the United States. He illustrated how the rise in market forces, changes in technology, and evolution in private and public funding approaches have come together to sweep away previous foundations for financial stability in American health care.

Nathan characterized the U.S. as the finest “repair-center health care system” in the world. It is also the most expensive and fragmented health care system in the world. He documented that while most Americans have been aware of the growing health care crisis for almost 30 years, government leaders and institutions have failed to address long-term, complex health care problems.

Americans can blame their leaders for inaction, but the problem also is rooted in current culture. Nathan said Americans want “sound-bite leadership and “feel-good policies.” Americans want simple answers to complex problems, and too often want solutions without having to sacrifice.

He described the United States as having major philosophical issues that have never been resolved. For example, is health care a commodity or a social good? Is it a right or a privilege? Should there be universal access to health care services, or is the U.S. a nation based on “survival of the fittest”?

Turning to health insurance coverage, Nathan reported that the number of Americans without health insurance has climbed from 38.7 million in 2000, to 47.9 million in 2007, leaving about 1 in 5 Americans without health insurance.

In Florida, the problems are more acute, with Florida tying New Mexico with the second highest uninsured rate in the country, behind #1-ranked Texas. In 2004 (latest data), Florida’s uninsured rate was almost 19 percent; the rate is only likely to be higher given the economic downturn experienced across the state during 2007-2008. And locally in Southwest Florida, the situation is the second worst in the state behind Dade County, with a 24.4 percent uninsured rate in 2004, and now estimated to be around 30 percent.

For the Lee Memorial Health System (LMHS), Nathan showed the effect of disparities in payments. For the latest fiscal year, patients with private health insurance constituted 32 percent of LMHS patients, but their payments offset 51 percent of LMHS costs. The shortfalls in reimbursements from Medicare, Medicaid, and uninsured patients, together with write-offs for charity care, were paid in

part, as Nathan described it, as a “hidden tax” that LMHS assigns to private insurers. Last year, LMHS had \$60 million in uncompensated care.

Nathan highlighted key trends that add to the continuing storms ahead for health care:

- Alarming rise in the numbers of obese Americans, bringing sharply higher costs to treat new heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension
- Distinct erosion in employer-sponsored health insurance, affecting working-age Americans and their families, as well as retirees, further stressing public programs
- Lack of federal negotiating power in the pricing of prescription drugs for Medicare Part D plans
- Increased competition by the private sector to segment out insurance and clinical services for the well-to-do and healthy, hobbling opportunities to spread risks among large populations, particularly for emerging state coverage plans
- Declining reimbursements to primary care physicians; “choice”-driven disincentives for continuity of care
- Unprecedented capital needs for competitive technology and facilities.

In the two hour presentation, Nathan stressed that the status quo is unacceptable and unsustainable. He argued that a confluence of leadership is needed. Partisan politics must be overcome. Special interest groups have to be at the table and kept in dialogue until a consensus is reached on solutions.

Jim Nathan challenged the audience to make health care a top priority, and communicate that to every political leader and every candidate running for office at all levels of government. Each candidate should be asked how he or she would bring parties together to solve the health care crisis. It was a timely assignment for the Sanibel community in this election year.

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva sponsored Nathan’s talk out of a growing concern for access, availability, and affordability of health care services, especially as they affect women of all ages. The Club expects to stimulate future events and invites others in the community interested in initiatives affecting Lee County health care services to contact it by e-mail at info@zontasan-cap.com or at P.O. Box 1244, Sanibel, FL 33957

The Zonta Club of Sanibel-Captiva is a service organization of professional women working together to provide hands-on assistance, advocacy and funds to strengthen women’s lives on the islands, in Lee County and around the world through Zonta International. Additional information about Zonta is available at www.zontasancap.com.

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