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Forum: Health care leaders talk about rising costs

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Experts see unsustainable costs in the health care industry.

Local business owners gathered Friday morning at an event organized by the Chamber of Commerce of Southwestern Madison County to learn about specific provisions that were created from last year's health care reform law. Local health care professionals and industry insiders also presented statistics indicating the rising cost of health care for patients and providers.

Since 1999, the average cost of health insurance premiums has gone up 138 percent for metro-east employers, said Southern Illinois Healthcare Foundation President Larry McCulley. He said that in 2009, more than 48 million people nationwide had no health insurance.

"In America right now, one-third of all adults do not have a primary-care doctor," McCulley said. "Over half of all children do not have a primary-care doctor. Think about that."

Regardless of what is happening with health care, hospitals are businesses, and businesses have to grow, said Mark Bethell, Gateway Regional Medical Center's president and chief executive officer. He said the Granite City hospital provided \$36.6 million in uncompensated health care last year.

"That is one of the highest in the region," Bethell said. "We have more uninsured or uncompensated people coming in that either don't pay their bills, have no health insurance who come in, and we have to and want to take care of those patients."

"We hope that this number in 2011 stays flat. More than likely, it will go up a little bit."

He also said the challenges the health care industry faces are too complex to single out.

"Our health care is so complicated that's it's not just one thing that you can point a finger at and say 'that's the problem,'" Bethell said. "There's multi-faceted problems that we have to overcome in the health care industry when it comes to solving and making health care affordable."

Tim Wells, an employee benefits specialist for The Crane Agency in St. Louis, said the cost to cover employees' health care is 145 percent greater today than it was in 1999. He said that during the past year, the average cost per active employee has gone up from \$10,387 in 2010 to \$11,176 this year.

"Employers are contributing a significant portion," Wells said. "However, they are shifting more back to employees. So although employers are paying a significant portion of this, employees over the years have been paying a significantly higher portion. That's only going up, and their wages are not keeping pace with them."

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