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New health care agreement in Adirondacks

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QUEENSBURY — While the nation's leaders were sparring in Washington D.C. about ways to fix the national health care system, dozens of state and local officials, upstate health care providers and community leaders gathered at the Warren County Courthouse to officially launch a new approach they said might help fix the growing crisis.

Hailed as a landmark venture, the Adirondack Regional Medical Home Pilot initiative is intended to enhance the efficiency and quality of care while boosting reimbursement of North County doctors to shore up their practices' dwindling finances.

With five major insurance providers now joining the state in agreeing to increase reimbursement rates to doctors, the physicians and clinics are in turn working to put more emphasis on primary and preventive care, boost follow-up medical care and management of chronic diseases, increase coordination between specialists, hike computerization of medical records, and issue Internet-based prescriptions.

The agreement encompasses 40 medical practices and about 125 physicians, CVPH Medical Center of Plattsburgh and various community hospitals and clinics, as well as Hudson Headwaters Health Network's 11 health centers.

The outcome? The health care providers, insurers, politicians and community leaders gathered Tuesday said they envision that the initiative will boost public health, reduce hospitalizations and enhance citizens' quality of life, while lowering health care costs.

Stephen Acquario, executive director of the New York state Association of Counties, said the Medical Home Pilot was believed to be the first of its type in the nation.

"Due to the joint effort of private insurers, health care providers and Gov. Paterson and Commissioner Daines, we've been launched front and center in the national health care debate," he said. "Those in power in Washington D.C. ought to take note of what we are accomplishing."

Daines also praised the initiative for its innovation.

"It's a marvelous example of teamwork," he said. "Here

in the North Country, you're providing a bright light showing where health care can go in the future."

Daines said that insurance companies and providers need to stop putting so much resources into competing for market share, and look toward cooperation instead.

"The Adirondack Medical Home Pilot provides the opportunity to demonstrate that something much larger can be accomplished when you bring all payers together with physicians and hospitals, and tie them together with new information technology, new systems of payment and incentives," he said. "This may be the wave of the future."

For about a decade, doctors have been fleeing rural areas, and primary-care physicians have been giving up their practices, because metropolitan practices and specialties, respectively, are far more rewarding financially, Hudson Headwaters CEO Dr. John Rugge and others said.

Far fewer new physicians are choosing primary care and

rural areas due to the lower pay and the burdensome costs of their education, Daines agreed.

Rugge, who practices in Warrensburg and Chester-town, was credited at the summit for both calling attention years ago to the looming crisis, then helping devise promising solutions.

Crediting Rugge for his longstanding work in the upstate New York to improve health care, Daines said that the North Country should erect a monument in his honor.

Rugge in turn praised Daines and Paterson for their support of the Adirondack Medical Home Initiative, by contributing \$10 million to launch it, as well as engineering legislation to help participating organizations sidestep anti-trust laws in their collaboration.

Five private insurers have agreed to the new reimbursement schedule, which pays doctors an additional \$7 per patient per month, which totals up to \$40 million over the

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next five years.

This extra money will help pay for practices alerting patients when they need check-ups and follow-up visits, and boost tracking of patients, and other vital actions that are not traditionally reimbursed.

But two major private insurers, he said — Excellus Health Plans and Blue Shield of Northeastern New York — are not participating at this point, Rugge said.

The Hudson Headwaters Board of Directors has voted to terminate relationships with payers not agreeing to the new deal. On Oct. 22, the board is likely to terminate its insurance contracts with Excellus and Blue Shield, Rugge said.

He urged that Adirondackers to sign up only with participating insurers.

"Employers and employees need to find insurance companies that support us in supporting you," he said. "We need everyone in on this — what's at stake is the future of health care in our small towns in the Adirondacks."