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KANSAS HEALTH REFORM: HARD WORK STILL AHEAD

The House and Senate Saturday passed legislation aimed at promoting health reform in Kansas. But with final budget negotiations not yet complete, the fate of funding for the health reform compromise remains in limbo.

At the beginning of the 2008 legislative session, the Kansas Health Policy Authority was optimistic about the future of comprehensive health reform for Kansas. Passed unanimously last year, Senate Bill 11 was the first step towards expanding health care coverage for the poorest of the poor. That bill also contained legislative instructions for KHPA to develop a comprehensive reform plan. After discussions with over one thousand Kansans, the KHPA developed the 21 health reform recommendations plan which it presented to the legislature and the governor in November, 2007.

Armed with a well-vetted and well-researched plan, the issue of health reform was still slow to gain traction this session. Almost immediately, key members of the legislature reversed themselves on provisions in Senate Bill 11. The comprehensive health reform package, which relied heavily on the private sector as directed by legislators in both Houses, became diluted. Still, the final bill contained policies aimed at expanding access to children, promoting health information technology to promote better coordination of care and save costs, improve care for pregnant women, and extend cancer screening. These items, however, are not yet funded as part of the final budget negotiations.

Executive Director Marcia Nielsen expressed concern that funding for health reform items remains at issue. She stated, "With a tightening budget picture, legislators will have to determine their priorities. Kansas families continue to struggle with high health care costs, and a health care system that is difficult to navigate. Passing a health reform compromise without funding it leaves all the hard work still ahead of us".

Although the health reform compromise left out critical elements of reform -- including a statewide clean air law and an increased tobacco user fee, KHPA will continue to pursue its goal of a healthy Kansas for all Kansans. "We didn't sign on for the short-term.", said Nielsen. "This is a multi-year effort and the important debate about reform in Kansas has begun. But for comprehensive health reform in Kansas to be successful, legislators will need to hear the voices of Kansas health care providers, patients, consumers and businesses. To build a strong Kansas economy we need healthy and productive individuals and communities. Funding for health reform is a smart investment -- only when Kansans work together and demand change will we see the investment required for comprehensive reform."

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