

What Our Governors Say About Health

In their annual addresses to their legislatures, the governors of the six Northwest states each mentioned health care issues. Among their concerns were workforce expansion and training and affordability of and access to medical care.

Alaska

Governor Frank H. Murkowski, January 23, 2003.

"The delivery of adequate health care is a real challenge, made more difficult by the escalating costs of Medicaid." The Governor asked the Departments of Labor and Workforce Development and Health and Social Services (DHS) to work together to ensure a sufficient number of qualified health care professionals throughout Alaska. He also directed DHS to identify strategies to maximize federal and state resources to improve the delivery of health care services along with preventative health care strategies. Finally, he expected to focus attention on alcohol and inhalant abuse, particularly among young people.

Idaho

Governor Dirk Kempthorne, January 12, 2004

"In this year, our Medicaid reforms are projected to save more than \$80 million. Add that to previous years, and the total is more than \$160 million. Yet not one person has been dropped from our programs. We have improved service while reducing costs." Reforms include actively promoting enrollment in the Healthy Connections program (to provide everyone in Medicaid with a primary care physician to reduce unnecessary and costly emergency room visits) and realigning medical reimbursement rates. The Governor has made long-term care his initiative for the year. He signed into law a 50 percent tax deduction for long-term care insurance and has allocated \$500,000 to increase this deduction to a full 100 percent. He went on to emphasize the importance of individuals making significant behavior changes to their diet and exercise in order

to reduce rates of chronic disease and higher costs in health care. "Our focus as a society should not just be on health care, but also on health," he concluded.

Montana

Governor Judy Martz, January 21, 2003

"We can all agree that Montana families deserve an unsurpassed quality of life. We must prioritize health and human service needs, funding what impacts peoples' lives the most. We must maximize the use of federal funding and address rising health care costs." The Governor emphasized the need for a senior discount prescription plan in Montana. She is creating a Medicaid Reform Commission to address growing needs and escalating health care costs, to find ways to make health care more affordable for Montana families, and to provide for those most in need. She went on to discuss her recommendations regarding persons with mental illnesses, which included the need for more community-based programs for the mentally ill by limiting the population at the Montana State Hospital in Warm Springs and creating three regional programs.

In addition to these health care issues, the Governor raised the issue of the shortage of qualified health care workers. She has established a task force to address those shortages.

Oregon

Governor Ted Kulongoski, February 21, 2003

"No one in Oregon should ever be forced to choose between eating and other necessities. One of those other necessities is prescription drugs. I said throughout the campaign that as Governor I would work to lower the cost of prescription drugs."

The Governor plans to form a consortium with Idaho and Washington to pool purchasing power in order to buy drugs at a reasonable cost.

Washington

Governor Gary Locke, January 13, 2004

"I am proposing to extend our gains in key areas: Keeping health care affordable and available by lowering insurance premiums for low- and middle-income families and small businesses, by helping doctors stay in rural communities, and by controlling medical malpractice insurance costs.... A third fundamental right that defines our vision for the state is the right to comprehensive health care that is affordable and available." The Governor went on to emphasize the need for the same quality of care in rural and urban areas and the importance of technology that enables doctors and patients in remote areas to consult with other medical experts around the country. He also pointed out that doctors serving mostly low-income patients deserve increased Medicaid reimbursements for critical services such as childbirth.

Wyoming

Governor David Freudenthal, February 9, 2004

"Staggering increases in insurance costs will drag down family budgets as well as the state's budgets. Failure to take steps to deal with this will cause a domino effect of uncertainty and financial calamity." The Governor urged the legislature to continue to fund the Healthcare Commission, as well as the Commission's recommendation to place before the voters a constitutional amendment setting caps on non-economic damage awards in medical malpractice cases and to establish a medical review panel.