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Commission outlines plan to implement health care reform by Daniel Leaderman

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Hundreds of thousands of previously uninsured Maryland residents are expected to become eligible for health care coverage in 2014 — a number that could tax the resources of the state's safety net of agencies providing care to low-income and uninsured residents, according to state health officials.

But a business plan released this past week outlines five areas where the state can ease the transition.

An estimated 350,000 Marylanders could get access to health insurance when key provisions of the Patient Protection and Care Act — President Barack Obama's signature health care reform legislation including expanded Medicaid eligibility — take effect Jan 1, 2014.

The plan — issued by the Maryland Community Health Resources Commission, which is part of the state Department of Health and Mental Hygiene — was based on surveys and interviews with local health departments, community health centers and other safety-net providers such as free clinics.

"This business plan provides a blueprint for how Maryland can provide ongoing support of the safety net infrastructure," said John A. Hurson, chairman of the commission, in a statement.

Survey responses indicate providers are not getting clear and timely information about different aspects of the Affordable Care Act.

Drawing such responses, the commission has outlined several areas where the state could help providers prepare for the changes.

One would be to assist safety-net organizations to navigate the mechanics of health care reform changes, such as by providing grant-writing help and aiding in establishing a clearinghouse of public health data that providers could use when applying for grants, said Mark Luckner, executive director of the commission.

Other agencies could work to help providers develop the work force needed to accommodate the new patients and to identify and enroll new patients in programs such as Medicaid, Luckner said.

The commission now will prioritize the suggestions to determine which should be started in the next three to four months and which will begin later this year and early next year, Luckner said.

"Maryland has become a national leader in implementing health care reform because we understand that these measures will reduce costs, increase access, and improve the quality of health care for all Marylanders," said Lt. Gov. Anthony G. Brown (D) in a statement.

"The [commission's] business plan will help us take steps to meet the expected growing need for health care services."

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