



For the Week Ending April 10, 2009

The Vermont legislature last week overturned Governor Jim Douglas' veto of a proposal allowing same-sex marriage, ending the most controversial and publicized issue of the 2009 session. Attention was firmly focused on the marriage issue over the past several weeks despite state budgetary woes caused by the national economic recession. Resolution of the same-sex marriage issue should allow the assembly to now turn its full attention to passing a FY2010 budget and adjourn on schedule.

State budget deficits have forced health care reform proponents to keep their aspirations in line with the new fiscal realities at the State House. Aggressive reform steps envisioned as recent as last fall have been pulled back and replaced by continued studies and evaluations of already-enacted programs. However, reform advocates are searching for proposals that can move their agenda ahead without requiring state funds and they are still pressing sympathetic legislators to support and pass those proposals.

The Senate Health and Welfare Committee last week continued hearings on a proposal (H.24) to limit out of pocket costs for colorectal cancer screenings. The committee also held initial hearings on an omnibus House bill (H.444) in advance of officially receiving the proposal. H.444 was referred to House Appropriations and is scheduled for full House debate later this week. The House bill proposes a variety of changes, including expanding eligibility to Catamount Health, physician-proposed requirements to regulate health insurer contracts with providers, health information technology proposals and other provisions.

Meanwhile, the House Health Care Committee is considering adding to a Senate-passed proposal (S.129) to study variations in health care, study health administrative costs, and promote shared decision-making between physicians and patients. The House committee is considering adding provisions contained in H.190 that would amend the certificate of need (CON) program, add provisions in H.212/S.123 regarding the state health resource allocation plan, and include a BISHCA study on ways to improve efficiency in the health care delivery system as proposed in H.276. The House committee also will consider requirements contained in H.306 to require publication of insurer contracts with hospitals and providers, and they may add language to S.129 to encourage the participation of a Vermont site in the national collaborative to study accountable care organizations (ACOs). The committee hopes to finalize its work on these issues and vote out a bill later this week.

In other health-related activity last week, Senate President pro-temp Peter Shumlin took the podium at a Friday news conference to promote the idea of a health insurance “smart card” to simplify and improve the health care payment system. Joined by representatives of IBM, Shumlin encouraged the health care system to adopt technology used by other sectors of the economy to speed and simplify transactions.

The Senate Appropriations Committee and Health and Welfare Committee members heard more about the idea at a committee hearing following the press conference. The Appropriations Committee appeared ready to adopt language in the budget to authorize the state to seek federal stimulus funding to pursue the idea. Shumlin and IBM said Vermont is positioned well to capture federal funds to pursue this idea.

If you are interested in this week’ s Legislative Committee Meeting schedules, agendas, and a listing of other meetings and activities, please visit the Vermont Legislature’ s website at <http://www.leg.state.vt.us/schedule/schedule2.cfm> Committee meetings are normally updated daily, and are subject to change without notice. If you plan on attending, you may want to call ahead to verify the agenda.

For more information on legislative proposals, visit the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Vermont website at www.bcbsvt.com or call Leigh Tofferi at (802) 223-6131 or Kathy Parry at (802) 371-3205. If you wish to discontinue receiving these updates or know of anyone else who would like to receive it, please call Kathy Parry or send an e-mail to webmail@bcbsvt.com