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Advocates get together to talk health-care reform

Greenville event addresses 'myths, lies' such as euthanasia rumor

By Liv Osby
Health writer

A broad-based coalition of advocacy groups visited Greenville on Thursday to counter what members call misinformation about health-care reform.

"We're doing this to try to dispel some of the myths, distortions and outright lies being presented," said Jane Wiley, director of South Carolina AARP.

For instance, she said, some people say reform will mean rationing of care and euthanasia of sick, elderly people.

"That is just not true," she said. "It enables Medicare beneficiaries, as an optional benefit, to talk to their doctor once every five years about end-of-life issues and what they want."

Frank Knapp, CEO of the South Carolina Small Business Chamber of Commerce, said he represents the other main group being targeted.

"We're being told that small businesses will have to shut their doors or lay off workers to survive," he said. "The reality is that small businesses will overwhelmingly benefit from reform. ... It's the only way they'll be able to afford to offer health insurance."

Knapp said small business now pays up to 18 percent more than large companies for premiums, and reform would reduce those costs.

John Ruoff of South Carolina Fair Share said that while some fear tax increases, just 0.9 percent of South Carolinians would be affected by a surcharge proposed to help fund reform.

"This is a graduated surcharge of 1.5 percent for a family making over \$350,000 to 5 percent for a family making \$1 million or more," he said.

Unlike some events where speakers were shouted down, those gathered at Senior Action were calm and orderly.

One woman related her experience with a public health system when she got sick in France — the doctor came to the hotel and treated her at no cost. Another wondered how reform would affect Medicare's solvency.

Jackie Rice, 68, a retired administrator from Greer, said she worries reform will mean tax hikes and called for greater efficiencies.

"My mom was in a nursing home and had to go two-eighths of a mile to the hospital and the ambulance cost \$500," she said. "That's abuse of the system. And I'm sure there are hundreds like that."

Sue Berkowitz, director of the South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center, which advocates for low-income residents, said one in five residents was uninsured in 2006. Today, she said, that number is estimated at one in four, or 1 million South Carolinians.

The four groups, all nonpartisan nonprofits, haven't endorsed any bill, but support the concept of reform.
