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State and Local Officials Explain Health Care Reform

City residents turned out to hear details about health care reform and to take part in a variety of health-related activities. (Courtesy Photo/Mark Dennis, City of Baltimore)

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While Republicans strove to repeal federal health care reform this week, Baltimore City's health groups and politicians promoted awareness of the bill at a Jan. 15 community health fair. About 30 city vendors provided on-site health coverage enrollment, free flu-shots and health screenings including diabetes, blood pressure and depression tests, while health experts in consumer forums appraised federal health reform's impact on the city.

"It's important to make sure we are getting the facts to Baltimore residents about healthcare reform because there is so much misinformation out there," said Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, one of many public officials at the event.

A few hundred residents trickled in and out of the five-hour fair held at the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg YMCA on East 33rd Street. Baltimore HealthCare Access organized the event, the first in a quarterly series this year, to educate the public on health care opportunities.

Children watched educational health theatre shows sponsored by Kaiser Permanente and most parents took advantage of health screenings or spoke with health providers. Vendors included Black Mental Health Alliance, a health referral group; Baltimore Healthy Homes and Communities and Baltimore City Department of Social Services.

Yet, overall attendance was low, possibly because the event was convened during the Ravens game, said a Baltimore HealthCare Access official.

Only a handful of residents participated in the health reform discussions, which detailed the federal measure's benefits for seniors, small businesses owners and the uninsured.

When fully implemented in 2014, the {Affordable Care Act} will give 90 percent of the 96,000 uninsured Baltimore City residents access to affordable coverage, officials said. Forum presenters also noted that a federal health exchange will provide an inexpensive alternative to other insurance options, while allowing currently insured residents to keep their doctors.

Under the measure, federal government will invest \$15 billion over 10 years on preventive services

and community health programs to address health disparities and reduce chronic disease rates. City Health Commissioner Oxiris Barbot praised this aspect of the bill, saying it will help thwart "chronic illnesses that contribute to spiraling health care costs."

Seniors will benefit the most, said Rep. C.A. "Dutch" Ruppertsberger, D-Md., another fair attendee. They will be entitled to free "wellness" visits and discounts on prescription drugs as the government closes the "donut hole" or coverage gap for seniors. Further, health care reform promises an overhaul of Medicare Advantage, the privatized medical plan many consider poorly managed.

And small businesses will receive tax credits, officials added.

The presenters also handed out information about some of the more controversial aspects of the bill, including the requirement that all persons obtain health coverage by 2016 or pay \$695 fines or 2.5 percent of their income. Also, mid-sized companies will be charged \$2,000 per worker if they don't provide federal health care subsidies for all employees.

But the federal measure's benefits far outweigh any negatives, said Ruppertsberger.

"The average family pays over \$13,000 for annual premiums," he said. "If we did nothing, the premiums would be \$25,000 in 10 years. We could not afford that as a country."

Ruppertsberger told health fair attendees "not to worry" about a possible repeal of health care reform in the House because it would not survive a Senate vote or presidential veto.

"I feel strongly that this health care bill will move forward," he said.