

## BOSTON GLOBE EDITORIAL

### Healthcare leadership

November 17, 2004

SENATE PRESIDENT Robert E. Travaglini and the Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation put the issue of health coverage for the uninsured squarely on the agenda of state government yesterday. They are right. It is time for the Legislature and Governor Romney to devise a plan that covers hundreds of thousands of state residents who go without this necessity of modern life.

The foundation convened a summit of 300 healthcare leaders at which it unveiled a study by the Washington-based Urban Institute that delineated the price of full coverage -- between \$374 million and \$539 million for all the uninsured in the state. Estimates of their number range from 450,000 to 650,000.

These cost figures assume that much of the money now spent on caring for the uninsured, partly reimbursed by the federal government, could be shifted into an insurance program. That would be difficult to do, especially since the Bush administration is trying to reduce the amount allotted to Massachusetts. Romney and the state congressional delegation need to make sure the money continues to flow into Massachusetts.

Even with this uncertainty, the estimates provided by the Urban Institute offer hope that covering a good number of the uninsured is economically feasible. It would be economically beneficial as well.

Dr. John Rich of the Boston Public Health Commission noted at the summit that "people who don't have insurance don't seek care until it really hurts." But if they were insured, they would more likely take the preventive steps to enhance their everyday lives, make them more-productive workers, and put less strain on the healthcare system when they become eligible for Medicare. The Urban Institute estimated that the value of lost health due to lack of coverage ranges from \$1.2 billion to \$1.7 billion a year -- three times the cost of providing insurance.

Travaglini knows firsthand the necessity of good coverage. "I was lucky enough to have access to the best healthcare in the world when I had heart disease and cancer," he said.

Travaglini wasn't giving out details of his insurance proposal yesterday beyond saying that it would rely on innovative business techniques and would cover 230,000 additional people over the next two years. Previously an advocate of a single-payer system, he said that approach is neither economically nor politically feasible.

Romney is expected to unveil his long-awaited plan soon, and House Speaker Salvatore F. DiMasi, through his new health aide Christie Hager, also expressed interest in expanding coverage. Buttressed by the findings of the Urban Institute, state government has an opportunity next year to enhance the health and well-being of hundreds of thousands of people in Massachusetts.