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Guest Commentary: Health care reform, the Colorado way

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By Anne Warhover

Whether the Affordable Care Act should be upheld, tweaked or repealed, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on the matter isn't the first or last word on reforming health care in Colorado.

In recent years, Colorado organizations and policymakers have explored many innovative approaches to improve Coloradans' health, health coverage and health care — both in tandem with and independent of the Affordable Care Act. In many respects, our state is already ahead of the curve in health and health care.

Fortunately, Colorado already has many innovative projects already in development:

- More Colorado children and adults are getting the health care they need (and avoiding expensive emergency room visits) because Colorado lawmakers implemented legislation that expanded eligibility for government health insurance programs by capturing a new revenue stream — the provider fee paid by hospitals. This bipartisan effort began years before the ACA was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Obama.
- More Coloradans have electronic health records, reducing medical errors and unnecessary duplication. Colorado's efforts to build a health information technology network that would let safety net providers across the state share electronic health records predated a federal push to encourage such technology by three years. The Colorado Regional Health Information Organization is collaborating with health providers throughout Colorado with the goal of deploying the technology to every community in the state by 2015.
- More Coloradans will be able to purchase health insurance. In 2011, Colorado lawmakers authorized what would become the Colorado Health Benefits Exchange, which will enable up to 960,000 Coloradans to purchase health insurance at a discounted rate. Though health insurance exchanges are a key component of the ACA, lawmakers on both sides of the political aisle agreed that it made sense for Coloradans to develop their own exchange rather than let the federal government do it for them.
- More Coloradans will see cost savings and efficiency because of efforts like the Center for Improving Value in Health Care. The center is partnering with the business community, providers and health plans to develop new solutions to contain costs, improve quality and build a stronger, more-efficient health care system.

Unfortunately, our overall health isn't as good as it should be. The Colorado Health Report Card shows Colorado still has the lowest obesity rate among adults, but we're losing ground fast. In

fact, our obesity rate rose from 19 percent to 22 percent in just one year. With that increase, Colorado lost its distinction as the last state in the nation with an obesity rate below 20 percent.

Worse still, in just four years, Colorado fell from No. 3 to No. 23 in childhood obesity. That rate now stands at 14 percent, and childhood obesity in Colorado is increasing at the third-fastest rate in the country. Childhood obesity is a direct cause of Type 2 diabetes, which means too many young adults will suffer from the chronic heart and kidney diseases typically associated with the elderly.

The annual Colorado Health Symposium — this year July 25-27 — gives health stakeholders a chance to learn about what works in other parts of the country. Symposium speakers will define other opportunities for greater affordability, access and choice, resulting in enhanced productivity, reduced health care costs and, ultimately, improved lives.

One symposium speaker, Dr. Jeffrey Brenner, developed a revolutionary new health care model known as "hot-spotting," which uses medical billing data from emergency rooms to map out "hot spots" of the most costly patients in Camden, N.J. Brenner has assembled a team of "hot-spotters" (including nurses, social workers and physicians' assistants) who make follow-up calls and home visits to those who receive care. This innovative model is already being used by the North Colorado Health Alliance.

Simply put, health care reform is moving forward in Colorado. As long as Coloradans remain receptive to new ideas, the state will build a fertile ground where innovation in health can flourish — regardless of what happens (or doesn't happen) in Washington.

Anne Warhover is president and CEO of the Colorado Health Foundation.