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OneLA tackles local health care reform

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OneLA, a community-organizing group, launched an effort to implement changes locally in access to health care during a public event at Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills on Jan. 30.

The event, which included appearances by Assemblyman Mike Feuer, Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones and Dr. Mitchell Katz, director of health services for Los Angeles County, focused on four main goals: helping small businesses provide health insurance to employees, assisting constituents in understanding the many avenues of health care in L.A. County, capping rising insurance rates and reducing the number of claims that are denied.

OneLA hopes to address these concerns on a local and statewide level.

"We're working in California," said Diane Vanette, a volunteer leader for OneLA who co-hosted the event. "We don't have much to do with federal" health care reform.

The effort to address concerns about health care began approximately one year ago, when a handful of congregants at Temple Emanuel launched conversations about their problems getting the coverage they needed. The issue was identified as an area of focus for temple leadership in part because of the difficulty that the temple, a small business, has had in finding funds to cover all their employees.

Already a member of OneLA, which brings together local dues-paying organizations including synagogues, churches, schools and unions to effect change, Temple Emanuel reached out to other organizations in the group and found signs of how much the issue of health care affects a broad swath of the community.

For the past year, leaders from various organizations associated with OneLA have worked together to come up with the four main goals addressed at the event and to strategize ways to reach those goals.

Groups came from Temple Beth Am; Our Lady Queen of Angels, La Placita; St. Agnes; and Immanuel Presbyterian, to name a few, and constituents told personal stories about their difficulties obtaining adequate health care.

One young woman described the road her parents faced as they went from paying \$80 for medical visits to being asked to pay more than \$600 after applying for Medicaid. Another told of receiving a \$27,000 bill for in-patient treatment after bringing her daughter home early from surgery, thinking that she would be saving money by not keeping her in the hospital overnight.

Throughout the event, leaders from OneLA committed to taking specific action to help effect change in the way health care is accessed by Los Angeles County residents, and in turn asked for the participation of the officials present.

For instance, in order to address the difficulty many community members have in navigating the county's complex health care options, OneLA leadership committed to organizing small groups of volunteers who would learn about the process of acquiring health care and teach others in their community.

They then pledged to hold a meeting in the spring to present ideas for reform, which Katz agreed to attend.

OneLA also pledged to outline the ways in which they would like to see small businesses assisted in providing coverage to their employees, as California's legislature works to implement health care exchanges per the terms of the federal health care reform act enacted last year. They promised to meet with small businesses to find out what they need.

Representatives from the organization then stated that they would hold a small-business summit in six months to discuss the outcome of those meetings.

Neither Feuer nor Jones agreed to attend either meeting. When asked, Feuer said he would "like very much" to go to the meeting with small businesses. Jones said he would "make every effort" to be there as well. Jones did, however, assign a senior staff member to work with OneLA in achieving their goal of fewer claims being denied.

"She will be working" with OneLA, he said.

For his part, Feuer has introduced a bill, AB52 — independent of the work being done by OneLA — which would require insurance companies to get approval from the state's Department of Managed Health Care and the Department of Insurance prior to raising rates.

He added that while legislation may come out of the OneLA effort in the long term, the more immediate need is to "galvanize the community" in support of access to health care.

The next steps for OneLA, Vanette said, will be to follow up with elected officials on the commitments they made at the Jan. 30 event and in prior discussions, and to begin to arrange meetings with community members and small businesses.

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