

## The primary concern in N.Y. health care

By RONDA KOTELCHUCK AND ELIZABETH SWAIN, Commentary  
Published 8:27 p.m., Thursday, August 9, 2012

We know that investing in wind, solar and other renewable energy could substantially reduce our energy costs and improve our environment. Now New York has the opportunity to substantially reduce costs and improve our health by investing heavily in primary care.

The health insurance expansion under the Affordable Care Act will exacerbate an already massive shortage in primary care, yet this is the one area that experts agree is essential to reducing the cost of health care and keeping people healthy. Recent studies are showing that high quality primary care can reduce health care costs by one-quarter to one-third.

The health care law has some provisions to expand primary care, including increasing Medicaid and Medicare rates for primary care doctors and incentives to practice in poor communities.

But to truly tackle rising health costs, we need to change how our health system is structured, and give considerably more power and resources to those who deliver primary care.

New York has one of the most top-heavy health care systems in the country. Too much of the health care dollar pays for costly institutional care and too little goes to the very providers who could prevent that costly care — in a state where 2.3 million people lack access to primary care. Our primary care shortages are the chief reason that New York ranks highest in the nation in avoidable hospital use and cost, fourth highest in emergency room wait times and sixth highest in total health care spending.

Yet we are in the middle of the pack in health outcomes. More than 40 percent of emergency room visits and 24 percent of hospital admissions or readmissions statewide are for conditions that better primary care would most likely prevent.

If we reduced hospital admissions in New York to the national average — an 11.6 percent reduction — we could save \$10 billion per year in Medicaid, Medicare, uninsured and private insurance costs combined. Not only would this lead to healthier families and communities, it would reduce government health care spending and health insurance premiums for all of us.

Thankfully, we have a singular opportunity to turn this around. The Cuomo administration is on track to save the federal government more than \$17.1 billion over the next five years by capping the Medicaid growth rate — while at the same time expanding coverage and benefits, unlike some other states. Now New York is asking the feds for about \$10 billion of those savings

to help "redesign" our health care system over the next five years.

More than \$2 billion would be used to make essential investments in primary care. This includes building, expanding and modernizing primary care facilities; training more providers to become "patient-centered medical homes" (advanced practice models that includes electronic medical records, team-based care and coordination with other health care providers); integrating primary care with mental health, supportive housing and emergency room care; and recruiting and retaining more primary care providers in communities that need them most.

Consider primary care the wind and solar of the health care sector — underinvested in for years, yet vital to changing the system for the better. New York now has the opportunity to invest in primary care to lower health care costs and produce healthier people.

We urge speedy approval of New York's "MRT Waiver" so we can get to work.

Ronda Kotelchuck is CEO of Primary Care Development Corp. in Manhattan, [www.pcdc.org](http://www.pcdc.org). Elizabeth Swain is president and CEO of the Community Health Care Association of New York State.

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