

MMA Participates in Event with HHS Secretary Sebelius

On Thursday, Sept. 3, the Maine Medical Association joined the AARP, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the state chapter of *Change that Works* in hosting a health care forum featuring HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. The event was held at the Buchanan Alumni House at the University of Maine in Orono. MMA President Stephanie Lash spoke on behalf of MMA along with five other Maine residents who told their stories to the Secretary, an array of media, and a pre-selected audience of about fifty citizens and representatives of interested stakeholder groups supporting health care reform.

The Forum was the fourth in a series of health care reform discussions MMA has hosted or participated in. In April, the Association hosted a stakeholder forum for Senator Olympia Snowe in Portland. In early July, the Association hosted a similar forum for First District Congresswoman Chellie Pingree at the MMA offices in Manchester. And in late August, MMA was invited to participate in and present at a health care provider forum for Second District Congressman Michael Michaud. A forum with Senator Susan Collins is being planned for the Fall.

On Thursday, Dr. Lash spoke of the difficulties of recruiting and retaining physicians to the state and the challenges of filling the gaps in the current system which results in nearly 150,000 Maine residents without health insurance of any kind. And the low level of reimbursement from the public plans (MaineCare and Medicare) results in a significant cost shift to the private plans.

Secretary Sebelius, having come to Orono from a event in Portland focusing on the unique difficulties of women in the health care system hosted by the Maine Women's Lobby and the AARP, advocated for comprehensive reform and announced that Maine was one of thirteen states receiving \$42.5 million each over the next five years to assist in providing health coverage to part-time, seasonal and direct care workers (see related article in this *Weekly Update*).

All five members of the panel spoke of their experiences and difficulties because of the high cost of health insurance. Attending the Forum on behalf of MMA, in addition to Dr. Lash, were President-elect David McDermott, M.D., MPH, James Van Kirk, M.D., Executive Committee member from Penobscot County, Erik Steele, D.O., active member from Penobscot County, Andrew MacLean, Esq., and Gordon Smith, Esq. from the staff. Dr. Steele is currently serving as interim CEO of the Blue Hill Hospital, which is part of Eastern Maine Healthcare.

Congress returns to Washington this week following a month long recess. On Wednesday evening, President Obama will address the Congress delivering what has been billed as a "major prime-time health-care address." The President will be seeking to shift the momentum in the current health care reform debate which has badly deteriorated over the last month and put the President and supporters of comprehensive health system reform on the defensive.

MMA continues to support comprehensive reform based upon the principles established in the Association's White Paper prepared and endorsed in 2003, and supports a "public option" so long as the alternative is consistent with the approach set forth in the White Paper. Those principles would preclude the public option reimbursing on the basis of Medicare rates or any other artificial benchmark. The White Paper and other MMA activities relative to Health System Reform can be found on the Association's Website at www.mainemed.com.

Published in 9/7/09 *Maine Medicine Weekly Update*