

As part of our partnership with the Delaware Valley Grantmakers, we are profiling individual issues. In this Q&A, Frances Sheehan of Brandywine Health Foundation explains how the region stands to benefit from the Affordable Care Act and what hurdles the region must clear in order to capitalize on the legislation's full potential.

How does the region stand to benefit from the Affordable Care Act?

There are a variety of ways that the ACA should benefit this region, most obviously by finally providing health insurance coverage to the tens of thousands of residents who are currently uninsured, especially young adults who often go uncovered and either don't get the preventive care they need and aren't covered when a catastrophe illness or emergency happens. This new coverage for individuals means that the many excellent health care providers here, such as hospitals, community health centers, and physician groups, will finally get paid for the care they currently subsidize.

What challenges does the region face in making the most of the Affordable Care Act?

Because Pennsylvania didn't opt to set up an exchange or to expand Medicaid, we have not received the benefit of federal financial support that other states such as Maryland, Tennessee and California have. This lack of funding means that communication, education, and coordination are hampered and could possibly impact the number of eligible people who enroll in insurance coverage that would benefit them significantly. Unfortunately, these challenges have been further hampered by the glitches in the federal exchange computer system. Once these are cleaned up – supposedly by Thanksgiving – we should see a pick-up in applications as has been seen in those states that have their own exchanges.

What is the Brandywine Health Foundation doing to aid in the roll out of the Affordable Care Act?

We fund the Maternal and Child Health Consortium, which has done so much around insurance enrollment for years, and we fund the FQHC [federally qualified health center] in our community, ChesPenn Health Services. We are also partnering with Brandywine Hospital to underwrite the cost of regular lunch meetings for the navigators and certified enrollment specialists in central and western Chester County so that they can share information and progress notes, as well as to coordinate educational outreach efforts.

Are there any major misconceptions about the Affordable Care Act that you would like to clear up?

There have been so many misconceptions put forward by those who are fundamentally opposed to the law, particularly the idea that this is nationalized health care – it couldn't be further from the truth. Many realize that this is a law that was designed to address the concerns of those who believe in a free market system for health care with those who are looking for a rational system to incentivize insurance coverage and preventive services. As was recently stated in a Philadelphia Business Journal opinion piece, if we can't find a way to make this public/private partnership work, the only other solution to our expensive system of care that does not result in world class outcomes is nationalized health care – and that definitely will not make conservative Americans happy.

Is there anything else you would like those attending the Sparking Solutions Conference to know?

We are undertaking one of the most significant, massive changes in health care financing since the launch of Medicare and Medicaid. It will require a great deal of education not just about specific insurance plans but more importantly it will require individuals to take responsibility for understanding their own "health care economy," no easy task in a world where health illiteracy is so prevalent.