

Health Care System Critical

By Senator Pete Campos

New Mexico's health care system is critical to our individual and collective well-being and we must act now, during the 2005 legislative session, to ensure that it is improved. We should not accept as status quo our dismal ranking as one of the states with the highest rates of residents without health insurance in the nation. We should acknowledge, as a recent study clearly shows, that the business of health care has a substantial impact on our entire economy, not just the economy of the health care sector.

We should take a broad, global view of our health care system whenever we speak of changing it. Ensuring our children's health, caring for our elderly and disabled, making sure that low-income New Mexicans have access to health care and protecting our retirees must all be part of the equation. Few issues are more important. And yet this critical issue is under continual threat of erosion. Without diligent efforts to preserve our health care infrastructure, especially our safety net of rural providers, we will see our access to these most necessary services impaired, especially for our most vulnerable citizens.

Obesity. Diabetes. Substance abuse. Cancer. Cardiovascular disease. All these and more take a terrible toll on New Mexico and its people when services and providers are unavailable due to lack of resources. We cannot achieve economic and educational success until we overcome obstacles presented by the state of our health care system. We will not ensure social and cultural equality as long as we are burdened by costly health care. We will not link urban and rural New Mexico as long as New Mexicans are compelled to flee to the cities to gain access to health care, or go without needed interventions due to lack of transportation, health insurance coverage or access to providers.

We must and we can make strides to overcome these challenges this year. Legislation will be considered to expand the number of school-based health care clinics so more children have access to quality health care. We will seek to expand the infrastructure of our primary care clinics, which serve our most rural and underserved populations. We'll look for ways to reduce the burden of malpractice insurance for

physicians and nurse midwives so that babies can be safely delivered no matter where they are born in the state. Prevention is critical to good health, so we'll examine proposals to strengthen physical education requirements and cut the availability of junk food in schools so that children can learn healthy habits early in life. We'll work to increase funding for Medicaid, so that the health care benefits for low-income and disabled New Mexicans are not cut, and so that the ranks of the uninsured do not continue to swell.

We'll work to safeguard the health care benefits of New Mexico's retired public servants while ensuring that administrative costs of such programs are reasonable. We'll examine innovative ways to address the shortage of nurses in New Mexico, including the possibility of streamlining the process for former military corpsmen to become nurses. And we will improve the physical infrastructure of our health care facilities with appropriations of state money.

Making sure that more children receive the immunizations they need to protect themselves and their classmates and friends from illness, finding new ways to hold down the spiraling cost of prescription drugs, especially for senior citizens, and working to integrate behavioral health care services into a comprehensive care program will continue to be state priorities.

A legislatively mandated, just-released report, *House Bill 955 Comprehensive Study on Health Care Costs in New Mexico*, reminds us that the complexity of health care delivery, administration and financing requires an ongoing evaluation of how administrative and fiscal policy are made at all levels. We learned that nearly \$8 billion was spent on health care in New Mexico in 2002 and that close to 75 percent of that total was public spending.

We are faced with tremendous challenges and opportunities as we go forward. During this legislative session, we must be unrelenting in our efforts to assure the people of New Mexico that this money is well spent and that the health care needs of all New Mexicans are met.