Colorado Picks Winnable Health Battles and Makes Headway

By Debra Miller [1]
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Colorado’s commitment to be the healthiest state will be achieved through spending smarter, not necessarily more, according to Tom Massey, deputy executive director and chief operating officer of the state Department of Health Care Policy and Financing.

“As health care itself changes, so must the way we finance health care,” Massey said. “We must reform our payment models so we get better quality and value.”

That’s the message he wants to leave with attendees at the health session, “Hitting the Health Care Trifecta,” on from 9 a.m. to noon Aug. 11 during the CSG National and CSG West Annual Conference in Anchorage, Alaska.

Shortly after Gov. John Hickenlooper took office in January 2011, his administration identified 10 winnable battles [2]. These are public health and environmental priorities with large-scale impact, and with known, effective strategies to address them. They are clean air, clean water, infectious disease prevention, injury prevention, mental health and substance abuse, obesity, oral health, safe food, tobacco and unintended pregnancies.

Earlier this summer, Hickenlooper announced [3] that teen birth rates had fallen 40 percent from 2009 to 2013. That drop moved Colorado from the 29th lowest teen birth rate in the nation in 2009 to the 19th lowest in 2012. Hickenlooper attributed the decrease to a program that helps low-income women get highly effective, long-acting, reversible contraceptives.

In order to address oral health needs, Colorado this summer added dental benefits for adults in the Medicaid program. Massey said his state, like others, struggles with establishing a robust provider network, especially in rural communities. So the state raised the reimbursement rates for dentists and other primary care providers.

When the governor directed his staff to plan for Medicaid expansion as allowed under the Affordable Care Act, he wanted a new system with cost reforms, Massey said. He said Colorado has been looking at key performance indicators such as hospital readmissions and high cost imaging and has documented savings of $3 million in the first partial year of reform and $6 million in the last full year.

Hickenlooper is seeking re-election this fall, but Massey doesn’t believe the health reforms in Colorado are at risk if Hickenlooper does not win.
“We’re satisfying the conservative element because we have been good stewards of the taxpayers’ money. And we have satisfied our more progressive friends because we have expanded care,” he said.

The health policy session in Anchorage also will include a trio of providers explaining how Alaska uses health care aides, oral health aides and telehealth in the vast rural stretches of the state where air service is the only means of transportation to secondary or tertiary health care settings. Bruce Bronzan will discuss use of technology in Maryland will improve health outcomes and reduce costs among vulnerable populations. Laurel Wood will emphasize the ongoing importance of immunizations to maintain population health.