

Congresswoman urges improved health care for minority children

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Chances are good you passed someone on the street yesterday who does not have health insurance.

Those chances are even better if that person was a child and a minority.

U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky told doctors Tuesday at Advocate Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge that the lack of health care insurance for minorities and immigrants is becoming a crisis that can only get worse with a weak economy.

Of those without health care insurance, one in eight is white, compared to one in five blacks and one in three Hispanics and American Indians, Schakowsky said.

An Evanston Democrat whose newly drawn 9th Congressional District now includes Des Plaines and Park Ridge, Schakowsky said the problem is no longer confined to urban areas.

"I think it is not a picture of the suburbs that is widely understood," Schakowsky told at least 100 people, mainly doctors, at Lutheran General.

On that point, Schakowsky may have been preaching to the choir. Doctors at Lutheran General seem keenly aware that many of their patients, particularly the young ones, either have substandard insurance or none at all.

Dr. Ira DuBrow, director of pediatric cardiology at Lutheran General Children's Hospital, said one-third of the patients they treat cost the hospital more than insurance reimbursements cover.

But the problem is even deeper than getting minority children to the doctor, some say.

Dr. Anita Deshmukh, a pediatric specialist who invited Schakowsky to Lutheran General, said minority children who can afford to visit a doctor often get dramatically different treatment than their white counterparts.

Deshmukh, a driving force behind a new health clinic that will open in January at Maine East High School in Park Ridge, said physicians need to consider things like culture and background when treating patients.

"A lot of doctors don't believe there is discrimination, but there is," Deshmukh said.

Schakowsky on Tuesday laid out a plan to improve medical treatment for minorities and immigrants that includes sensitivity training for doctors and others in the medical field.

She also encouraged doctors to lobby state and federal officials for more money and to protect programs that already exist, like Medicaid, to help minorities pay for health care.

Schakowsky said health clinics in schools, like the one being planned for Maine East, are a good start to providing young people, especially minorities, easy access to health care.

At least 50 different languages are spoken at Maine East, and 40 percent of the students were not born in this country.

Dr. C. Steven Snider, superintendent for Maine Township High School District 207, pledged to work with Schakowsky to make the Maine East clinic a model for others across the country.

Schakowsky's opponents in the November election gave mixed reviews to her plan for health

care.

Stephanie Sailor, a Libertarian candidate challenging Schakowsky in November, said more government isn't the answer to improving health care for minorities.

"Our current problems with the health care system were caused by government. More government isn't the answer," Sailor said in a prepared statement.

But Republican candidate Nicholas M. Duric of Park Ridge agreed with Schakowsky that programs like Medicaid should be protected. He also said the health care problem affects everyone, not just minorities.

"I'd like to see members of Congress give the same health care benefits they have to people who are having trouble," he said.