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Chronic disease targeted by state advocacy group

■ Health insurance for children also needed, West Virginians for Affordable Health Care says

By [Eric Eyre](#)
Staff writer

West Virginia is one of the unhealthiest states in the nation, with high rates of obesity, diabetes and heart disease.

However, there's a nonprofit advocacy group that has written a prescription in hopes of fixing many of the state's health-care woes.

Founded less than two years ago, West Virginians for Affordable Health Care has become one of the strongest voices for health-care reform in the state.

Over the weekend, the organization's board, which includes legislators, physicians and health-care administrators, unveiled priorities for the upcoming legislative session in January.

The group plans to urge lawmakers to reduce health-care costs and provide health insurance for everyone in the state — especially children.

An estimated 30,000 West Virginia children don't have insurance — and that number has been increasing in recent years.

"That's unacceptable," said Perry Bryant, director of West Virginians for Affordable Health Care. "This is a moral stain on our state."

The organization supports an expansion of the state Children's Health Insurance Program that would provide coverage for up to 5,000 additional low- to middle-income kids.

President Bush recently vetoed a bill to renew and expand the federally funded program, and last week the U.S. House didn't muster enough votes to override the veto.

Bryant's organization also will prod lawmakers to reduce chronic illnesses, which drive up health-care costs across the state.

It's not enough for a doctor to talk with a patient for five minutes or so about why it's important to eat right, lower blood pressure and reduce cholesterol levels, Bryant said. People with chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, should receive sustained counseling, preferably from a nurse, he said.

The health-care advocacy group also wants legislation that would take soda pop and junk food out of vending machines at schools, and fund programs to promote walking and bicycling.

Nationally, about 75 percent of every health-care dollar is spent on treating people with chronic disease. The percentage is likely even higher in West Virginia.

"If West Virginia is anything, it's chronic illnesses," Bryant said. "It's important that we give people the tools to control chronic illnesses."

The nonprofit organization also is pushing for a law that would require drug company representatives to report what they spend promoting prescription drugs to doctors. Physicians who accept more than \$1,000 in gifts, meals and other freebies should be identified, Bryant said.

Drug companies often pass on promotion costs to consumers, he said.

"We need to shine a light on those expenses," Bryant said. "We're not saying they can't do that. We're saying we won't pay for it."

The health-care group also wants a law that would require companies to provide workers with seven paid sick days a year. Small businesses would be exempt.

Bryant said parents should be able to take time off to care for sick children. "It's a pro-family piece of legislation," he said.

The group's other legislative priorities:

- Make state funding available to allow doctors to prescribe medications via e-mail.
- Require that hospitals, health centers and doctors charge uninsured patients the lowest fees possible — the same amount they've negotiated with commercial insurance companies.
- Prohibit pharmacy benefit managers at state agencies from reporting drug prescription patterns in West Virginia to drug manufacturers.
- Promote breastfeeding.
- Require the state Medicaid office to notify state lawmakers when it requests permission from the federal government to make major program changes.
- Support hiring an independent insurance consumer advocate for the state.

West Virginians for Affordable Health Care has more than 350 members and is funded by private contributors, the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, the Sisters of St. Joseph Fund and Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

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