

## **Nick Coleman: State's neediest face grim fate if budget cuts hit health care**

By **NICK COLEMAN**, Star Tribune

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Dr. Elizabeth Frost is a family practitioner at St. Paul's West Side Community clinic. One day last week, she diagnosed a likely case of breast cancer in a 51-year-old uninsured woman too poor to pay for her exam. Fortunately, the state of Minnesota has a free cancer-screening program for women over 40 to help detect breast and cervical cancer.

But Frost worries that the program might disappear -- along with services like basic care for pregnant women -- in the face of a \$5 billion state deficit. That's because Gov. Tim Pawlenty may propose budget cuts to health and human services programs just as rising unemployment places more demands on the system.

Cutting health care is the exact wrong idea, says Frost, who is co-chair of the Minnesota chapter of Physicians for a National Health Program. She says access to basic care already is decreasing every day.

She said she knows one low-income patient who needs an MRI and a knee injection in order to return to his job, but he hasn't been able to find a doctor who will treat him without an up-front \$800 payment.

"People are no longer being allowed to work out payment plans, because doctors and clinics need the money up front," Frost says. "Which means no access for a lot of people. And more every day."

Frost and many other front-line health care providers worry that the state budget crisis may lead to further health care cuts that could lead to a disaster.

In his 4,000-word State of the State address Thursday, Gov. Tim Pawlenty devoted just 100 words to health and human services, and said even less. Other than promising to "protect all current health care eligibility for children," he offered no proposals. Yet health care costs are rising sharply and Pawlenty has hinted that his budget will include cuts in areas crucial to the health and welfare of a growing number of Minnesotans.

Three years ago, Pawlenty vowed that all Minnesota children should have health care coverage. But an estimated 77,000 children (along with 300,000 adults) remain uncovered, and that number could skyrocket as moms and dads lose their jobs and their

insurance. So it's puzzling that Pawlenty's main fix now is to cut tax rates on Minnesota corporations in half. Even if such a plan paid off in the long run with new jobs, it ignores the present crisis.

"The idea of cutting corporate taxes while health care suffers is contrary to the need to grow Minnesota and retain our values as a state," says Frost.

Even if you agree that cutting corporate taxes is a good idea, it is a far-off solution to an immediate crisis. It's like the captain of a sinking ship saying shipbuilders should be given government incentives to build better ships. He might be right, but it won't keep his passengers dry.

Politicians talk about using the deficit to "re-invent" government, but seem blind to the opportunity to reform the system so everyone has guaranteed access to affordable care.

"Hanging on to a health care system that is not working is not 'status quo,'" says Dan McGrath, executive director of Take Action Minnesota, a coalition of unions and progressive groups such as the Children's Defense Fund. "This is the time when leadership really matters. Instead of the status quo, there is an opportunity here to do something bigger."

McGrath's group is pushing for a new law called the Minnesota Health Security Act (for details, go to [www.makehealthhappen.org](http://www.makehealthhappen.org)) that would extend health coverage to all Minnesota children and guarantee, within a few years, that all Minnesotans are covered and have to pay no more than five percent of their income for health insurance.

"Health care problems, from rising costs to declining access, run through all the problems the state faces," McGrath says.

On Thursday, Pawlenty asked legislators to imagine Minnesotans sitting at our kitchen tables, worrying about our bills.

That's a good idea. When you do that, you will see: Health care is on top of the pile.

"If government should be 're-invented,' let's start with the problem everyone is facing, whether you're a family or a business owner who can't afford health coverage for his employees," says McGrath. "It's time for Minnesota to reclaim the mantle of being a national leader in health."

[ncoleman@startribune.com](mailto:ncoleman@startribune.com) • 612-673-4400