

Panel suggests changes to improve health care

JUNEAU — Gov. Steve Cowper has received the final report of the Governor's Interim Commission on Health Care which suggests a number of changes to improve Alaska's health care system.

Specific recommendations include care for indigent Alaskans, expanding community based health services and establishing comprehensive health screening for children and pregnant women.

The report also calls for renewed health planning efforts in Alaska with an emphasis on preventive health practices.

"Health care costs in Alaska are rising, especially for those who can least afford it. The goal of this commission was to find some answers and it did a commendable job," Cowper said.

"We'll be taking a close look at the recommendations and will form a special team to analyze the results and decide what administrative and legislative action is necessary."

Concerned over the rise in the costs of health care and mindful of the need to provide health care for Alaskans unable to afford it, Cowper convened the health commission in September 1987.

Findings in the report show health care remains a major factor in the economy. In 1986, the latest figures available, health care spending in the United States totaled \$458 billion, more than one-tenth of the country's gross national product. In Alaska, health care spending in 1986 was \$1.5 billion, more than \$2,700 per person.

However, health care still accounts for only about 4 percent of all state and local government spending in Alaska, compared to the average for all states of about 12 percent.

Demographic changes affect the cost of health care in Alaska. As the population ages, health care costs rise.

On average, a person over 65 uses three times the health care of someone under 65. Alaska currently has the lowest percentage of seniors of the 50 states, but its senior population is growing rapidly.

Some of the commission's recommendations include:

- The state should plan, develop and fund a home- and community-based service system for people in need of care for the long-term as an alternative to the less desired and more expensive institutional care.

- A state working group should explore and develop health insurance plans for medically uninsured Alaskans.

- The governor should appoint and fund a Liability Insurance Task Force, outside the legislative process, in an effort to achieve meaningful liability reform.

The Cowper administration has already begun to implement several of the commission's recommendations, including:

- A survey of adolescents to determine necessary health, education and social service requirements — suggested by the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth.

- Expansion of programs aimed at reducing the incidence of fetal alcohol syndrome — advanced by the Governor's Interim Commission of Children and Youth.

- An increase in coordinated care for pregnant women.

- Medicaid coverage of prescription drugs.

The Health Care Commission was a 10-person panel comprised of legislators, state agency officials and health care professionals.