

Cambridge College Tackles Diversity and Disparities in Massachusetts with Health Care Forum

By Kim Dunbar

Cambridge College celebrated Veteran's Day by tackling a very important issue facing Massachusetts health care. On Monday, November 12th, the Cambridge College School of Management and Health Care Management Program presented its annual Health Care Panel. This year's theme was "Diversity and Disparity in Massachusetts Health Care." Over 400 Cambridge College students, faculty and administration as well as distinguished members of the Massachusetts health care community gathered to listen as the dynamic panel discussed many of the barriers that block equal access to health care and the ways in which these Commonwealth health care leaders are trying to eliminate these barriers.

The panel, which was moderated by President of the Oral Health Foundation Ralph Fuccillo, included the new Massachusetts Secretary of Health and Human Services Dr. JudyAnn Bigby, the new President of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation Jarrett Barrios, the House Chair of the Joint Committee on Public Health and State Representative Peter Koutoujian, and the new Commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Social Services Dr. Angelo McLain.

"We can never do enough to prevent health disparities in this country," Mr. Fuccillo said in his opening remarks.

Dr. Bigby was the first panelist to speak, informing the audience that the idea of health care disparities is not a new phenomenon and has been documented for over 50 years. "They are all over the state across many different populations," she said. Dr. Bigby added that there are many factors that contribute to disparity, and we need to start thinking broadly about the solutions. "We need to focus on prevention, but that is not how the system is built," she said, pledging that the Patrick administration is dedicated to improving the issues. Under Dr. Bigby's leadership, the state has awarded over \$600,000 in grants for public health and violence prevention.

State Representative Koutoujian is also working to bring the disparity issues to the forefront of health care conversations. Representative Koutoujian, who is the co-author of the recent Commonwealth of Massachusetts report on Health Disparities, said that the report took a lot of work to complete because people did not understand the issue. "It is difficult to get people to keep it in their heads," he added.

Dr. McLain said that a couple of the reasons why there is a high rate of African-American children in foster care are because of the lack of access and cultural bias and misunderstanding. "People like me make decisions based on bias," he said.

"Disparity is not just about access or cultural competencies, it's about perceptions," Representative Koutoujian said. Dr. McLain said that the Department of Social Services

is working on several strategies to help improve this problem, including involving families more in the decision-making process, recruiting and retaining a diverse staff, and developing assessment tools that are culturally grounded.

All four panelists made compelling points in an effort to bring healthcare disparities to the forefront. Mr. Barrios, for example, made the following point: "We are taught in the Pledge of Allegiance that there is 'liberty and justice for all.' There is a promise that all of us can have what only most of us have," Barrios said. What angers Mr. Barrios most about healthcare is that it is a luxury not all people can afford. Mr. Barrios added that while Massachusetts is making progress after passing the state reform bill which requires everyone to have health insurance, the state still has a long way to go. "We have to remove the barriers if we are going to close the disparities gap... We are all trying to make that promise mean something," he said.

While health care disparities are a major problem in Massachusetts and throughout the country, the issue can certainly be fixed. "That light at the end of the tunnel is not a train coming," said Dr. McLain.

Cambridge College plans to supplement the panel with an Institute for Disparities and Diversity in Health Care Management. The Cambridge College and its Health Care Management program are ideally situated to help address the concerns with racial and ethnic disparities in health care services. As our society has become increasingly multi-cultural, these issues have also escalated. Cambridge College's student body is diverse and many of its students have previous or current experience in the health care industry.

"This is the best place to talk about health care disparities," said Mr. Barrios. "More than any institution, this one looks like America," he added, noting that the College has students from all over the world.

The Institute would be comprised of a certificate/ degree program in Health Care Management with a concentration in Disparities and Diversity in Health Care, a Disparities and Diversity Colloquium and collaboration with community Health Care organizations. The College is hoping to have the Institute ready in the spring of 2008.