

Forum Focus

Ironton, Missouri



Last year the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) held nine public forums throughout 84 Missouri counties and the city of St. Louis to listen to Missourians' health concerns. The foundation has responded to a number of those concerns and has begun a second round of 10 public forums in 2003, the first of which occurred Feb. 11 in Ironton.

Held at Arcadia Valley Middle School, the foundation's first public forum this year attracted approximately 75 community individuals from as far as Rolla, more than two hours away. Co-sponsored by the Iron County Health Department and C.H.A.R.T., the forum targeted Crawford, Dent, Washington, Iron, Madison, Reynolds, Wayne and St. Francois counties.

During its travels, the foundation has encountered many individuals committed to solving health care problems. The citizens who attended the Ironton forum were especially passionate, most likely because of Ironton's isolation from a hospital or urgent care facility.

Eight students from Arcadia Valley High School came well prepared, making a presentation on this very lack of service. The students, freshmen in Don

Barzowski's government class, used charts and graphs to support their argument for a local ambulance service and urgent care facility. They pointed out that Iron County has the fourth highest accident rate in the state of Missouri – a serious concern when it takes 32 to 50 minutes to get to the nearest hospitals.

Among the challenges mentioned in response to their request was the difficulty in reimbursing ambulance

services when insurance does not cover them. Alan Freeman, MD, Big Springs Medical Association, reinforced concerns about reimbursement in regard to medical services. Freeman's organization serves four counties, including Reynolds, Iron, Carter and Shannon, with four family clinics and one dental clinic. He emphasized the need for community organizations to collaborate to keep existing services in operation.

Heather Sheets of HospiceCare Inc. stated that reimbursement from Medicare and Medicaid also are a barrier for her organization, which brings together doctors and registered nurses to care for

the terminally ill. She stressed the need for sustainable solutions to these issues.

Multiple speakers asked the foundation for help in establishing a rural outreach hospital that would provide adequate services

“The problem of not having a hospital is frightening ... The lack of emergency care in Iron County affects everyone.”

Student, Arcadia Valley High School, Ironton

and be more accessible to citizens. Rodney Gross of Madison Medical Center, the closest hospital, was one of several speakers who expressed a willingness to work on bringing a clinic to Ironton. Located in Fredericktown, the medical center serves patients in Madison, Wayne, St. Francois, Iron and Bollinger counties.

In addition to access and reimbursement, dental and mental health care continue to be major concerns for residents in south central Missouri. According to Douglas Ross, DDS, Crusade for Children's Dental Health, “Dental disease is five times more prominent than asthma in children ... It is easier

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to prevent than to repair.” Ross demonstrated his concern with photos of young children with diseased teeth and gums, citing the statistic that 95 percent of these diseases are preventable. He advocated a program that would show parents how to teach their children to take care of their teeth.

Several speakers spoke to a growing mental health crisis in Missouri, expressing a need for better education and diagnosis in order to prevent suffering and

“We need all the help we can get to survive in rural areas.”

Alan Freeman, MD,
Big Springs Medical Association, Ellington

increase awareness. “We need mental health services, case workers and psychologists. These services are needed for people of all ages ... No one is above mental illness,” said Ed Faulkner, a Farmington resident.

Barbara French, Community Outreach for Southeast Missouri, echoed Faulkner’s concern, noting that one in five



children suffer from mental illness. “So many children suffer from mental illness. Educational training is needed to help keep families together.”

Glenda Ludwig, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), emphasized that mental illness can often be overcome with the proper assistance. She also noted that mental illness can cause suppressed immune diseases that can be more threatening to the human body than the mental illness, making diagnosis and treatment even more essential.

The forum provided the community with opportunities to collaborate and bring needed primary health care services to the region, as well as to learn about MFH and how it could

be a resource to this vital community.

James R. Kimmey, MD, president and CEO of MFH, wrapped up the evening with a challenge to the community: “If you can come together and solidify a project regarding primary health care services, the foundation will review your proposal and consider funding.”



Grand Central Building, Suite 400 • 1000 St. Louis Union Station • St. Louis, Missouri 63103-2269

Phone: (314) 345-5500 • Fax: (314) 345-5599 • Toll Free: (800) 655-5560

E-mail: info@mffh.org • www.mffh.org