

Public's thoughts on health wanted

By Brian Lockhart
Staff Writer

HARTFORD — After spending nearly a year wrestling with how to provide affordable, quality health care

to all state residents, the HealthFirst Connecticut Authority is hitting the road to hear from the public.

Its three-week tour begins tonight in the northeastern town of Putnam.

Speak up

Members of the HealthFirst Connecticut Authority will meet with the public from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday at Norwalk City Hall.

The authority's 15 members will head to lower Fairfield County, appearing from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Thursday at Norwalk City Hall.

Subsequent hearings have been scheduled for Torrington, Wallingford, Norwich, Danbury, Waterbury, Hartford and Manchester.

"We have some preliminary, broad views that we're ready to talk about with people," authority co-chairman Margaret Flinter, clinical director for the Community Health Centers Inc., said. "We absolutely want to hear concerns and thoughts from across the state. ... It is just so important."

The General Assembly established the authority during the 2007 legislative session and charged members with looking at ways of providing "universal health care" including both a single-payer system and employer-sponsored health plans.

The group, which first met last October, is composed of health care professionals and advocates as well as representatives for consumer and business interests.

Flinter is clinical director of the Community Health Centers Inc., which runs Norwalk Smiles and the Dental Center of Stamford.

Her co-chairman, Tom Swan, who represents the health care consumer, man-

See **HEALTH**, Page A17

Health

Continued from Page A15

aged Greenwich businessman Ned Lamont's 2006 campaign against U.S. Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn.

The authority's study is due this December, before state lawmakers return to the capitol in early January for the 2009 legislative session.

According to data released last month by the U.S. Census Bureau, about 326,700, or 9.4 percent of state residents did not have health coverage last year — down from 10 percent in previous years.

While they await the authority's study, lawmakers have been trying to address

the issue.

Republican Gov. M. Jodi Rell this year launched the Charter Oak Health Plan, which is aimed at uninsured or underinsured residents aged 19 to 64.

The plan has been credited as unique nationwide, but the administration has come under fire from Democrats and some health care advocates for not waiting to build up a strong provider network.

Hospitals and private physicians have complained the reimbursement rates are too low.

For the past two years, state House Majority Leader Christopher Donovan,

D-Meriden, has sought to pass legislation allowing municipalities, non-profits and small businesses to participate in the state's health insurance program to lower their existing rates.

The concept was first proposed in the early 1990s by then-state Comptroller Bill Curry.

The bill, which faced significant Republican opposition, passed the General Assembly in the 2008 session and was vetoed by Rell over concerns it would prove too expensive.

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