

As the CEO of the largest health center in Rhode Island, I am acutely aware of the impact of rising health care costs on both our operations and our mission. A healthy economy needs a healthy workforce, but we find ourselves caught between local, state and national forces at work in the marketplace.

Health care continues to be a national issue and will continue to be one for the foreseeable future. The Affordable Care Act continues to be a political lightning rod for both parties and President Donald Trump. With the health care sector now responsible for 20% of the United States economy and tied directly to my agency's daily operations, sporadic tweets and political posturing create unnecessary economic instability.

The Trump administration's abrupt strategy changes ensure that the ACA drama will be played out in the courts, as well as the 2020 presidential election. Twenty million U.S. citizens could potentially lose their health care coverage if the interpretation of one federal judge in a lower court is upheld.

The potential impact on Rhode Island businesses would be immense. Thousands of Rhode Islanders would lose their health insurance, millions of dollars of economic impact would be lost, and thousands of jobs could potentially be cut from health care and related sectors. "Trumpcare" has been promised, but not until after the election and no one seems to know any details.

The health care market is evolving in both size and scale. Economic pressures are driving mergers and consolidations among health plans, hospitals and the medical practices themselves. Fortress Rhode Island is beginning to evolve – regional market forces are shifting health care planning and specialty care across state lines. R.I. is not strongly positioned to compete on a regional level in the health care sector, and

we should be ready to speak with a single voice to protect the health care interests of everyone in our state.

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Innovation is crucial. Providers and patients are feeling the impact of the highly stressful and broken health care system. The “hassle” factor of referral requirements, increasing copays, and prescription costs are the new norm in health care and contribute to clinician burnout, consumer dissatisfaction, lower quality and higher costs. I enjoyed hearing the discussion at the April 4 Providence Business News Spring Health Care Summit about various options to control costs, from well-being models to new care models driven by health analytics. These efforts, combined with new “disruptors” such as Jeff Bezos and Warren Buffett, show that health care is more than just market volatility – it’s an area of opportunity to make a real difference.

At Providence Community Health Centers, we are impacted by all of the above every day. The ACA has had a tremendously positive impact on our patients. By broadening the workforce’s access to insurance, employees stay healthier, and people are alive today that would not have been. The well-being of Rhode Island is improved by having healthy citizens and a healthy workforce.

Our health center is focusing on access to high-quality health care. How can we improve patient outreach and entry into care? How can we better help people to improve their health? While we cannot directly control the payment system or national drama, we can focus on our patients.

Our staff works every day to improve access to health care, reduce barriers to care and improve the health status of everyone in the communities we serve regardless of their ability to pay.