

Guest Columnist

*The Daily Mail*

*Funding Health Care Essential*

By Steven Summer

December 12 2003

Every day, hundreds of compassionate caregivers work in West Virginia hospitals, tending to patients, celebrating new life, consoling those who have lost loved ones and restoring hope and health to people in their communities.

West Virginia hospitals last year cared for 316,000 inpatients, treated six million outpatients, performed 241,000 surgeries and delivered 20,000 babies. As the largest component of our state's healthcare system, hospitals play a special role in serving patients around the clock – regardless of their ability to pay. Hospitals are the hub of our healthcare safety net system, providing services that range from primary care to community-based emergency preparedness.

More than 74,000 West Virginians work in the healthcare system and 36,000 of these workers are employed by hospitals. As one of the top three community employers, hospitals provide jobs for thousands of people and support vital public services, as well. In terms of employment, the latest state figures show the healthcare sector ranks first in comparison with manufacturing (68,600 jobs), construction (33,600) and coal (16,200).

Healthcare contributes \$2.1 billion annually to West Virginia's payroll, is an economic stimulus, strengthens the employment base and is one of the most important features of the state's infrastructure. Every 100 healthcare jobs support as many as 70 additional jobs in other areas of the economy. Healthcare services also help to attract and retain business.

It is important that business leaders and other key decision makers understand the contribution of healthcare to the state's economy and how government healthcare policies affect private employers. Because so many West Virginians are insured through publicly financed programs, government is responsible for a large portion of

hospital revenues. (On average, 70 percent of hospital revenue comes from government payers.)

Consequently, when state healthcare programs do not pay their coverage costs that shortfall is shifted to private businesses. Last year, West Virginia passed over \$110 million of Medicaid and PEIA costs to private employers; Medicare nearly doubled that figure.

Such a shift sometimes makes private health insurance too expensive for state residents and on any given day 250,000 West Virginians are uninsured. Because the underinsured and uninsured use emergency rooms as their primary source of healthcare, many hospitals are experiencing a mounting hospital deficit for uncompensated care. Thus, underinsured or uninsured workers struggling to stay healthy and remain employed unintentionally compromise the state's economic opportunities.

West Virginia needs adequately funded government healthcare programs and a healthy, insured work force. Business leaders must become strong advocates for well-funded government healthcare programs, and they must help shape policies that will ensure a viable, stable healthcare system with a predictable source of funding in order to meet the needs of all West Virginians.