

Help Alaskans develop healthy habits

ADN Compass opinion piece from Rep. Sharon Cissna

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When the House Health and Social Services Finance Subcommittee started work on Gov. Frank Murkowski's fiscal 2007 budget, the committee chair said "I'm shocked by these numbers." The governor's total request for health and social services was a whopping \$2 billion.

That \$2 billion is a far cry from the approximately \$46 million required for health and social services for fiscal 1972. It is a fact that the department has more and different responsibilities than it did 35 years ago. Yet as the years have gone by and health spending has increased, Alaska continues to maintain its status as a "leader" in alcohol, tobacco, substance and behavioral abuses.

The growing cost of health care for every person, business and government in Alaska, and the number of underinsured or uninsured people, requires immediate relief. That relief will not come from the current proposed budget. The \$2 billion will be spent predominantly on chronic health problems.

I talk to many physicians and therapists who have stories of real hope and transformation in the people they serve. The common thread is that not enough services are available soon enough, nor are consequences for poor behavioral choices understood.

Yet the Health and Social Services Finance Subcommittee will continue to fund the chronic care and cut prevention programs because the most vocal of their constituents tell them they must. Our health systems do not openly create rewards for choosing good habits over socially approved ones.

We could slide for another 35 years if financially possible to do so. But the cost of health care nationwide is climbing. National financial experts forecast that these increases will continue. Health experts tell us that for the first time recorded, the youngest in our population will have a shorter life span than their parents. Each year the percentage of household earnings dedicated to health care is increasing. Under the current growth, the percentage for health care will soon equal a mortgage payment.

Hopeless? Ironically, this complicated, seemingly intractable problem could be dealt with simply. A huge percentage of our health care costs (both financial and social) are created by unhealthy behavior choices. However, choosing well and building healthy habits is not that easy.

Each good choice requires both information and the support of others. We all belong to a family, community, work and/or social group. It is through these influential relationships that we can pass on helpful information and provide encouragement.

Recently introduced legislation, HJR 30, uses this dynamic to begin what can be a simple way to dramatically increase the health and well-being of Alaskans. This bill, known as "the Prevention Compact," is an invitation to Alaska governments, to organizations, to every man, woman and child in the state. All are invited to join in a statewide discussion, person to person and group to group, to share lessons and wisdom learned in preventing health risks.

Good habits require nurturing and persistence. They can't be adopted and achieved overnight. The Prevention Compact provides the rest of 2006 for Alaskans to join the Compact. It sets 2007 as the year when hundreds or thousands of habits for health take hold.

This bill has no fiscal note because it relies totally on members making their own choice and sharing their knowledge. When it comes to promoting health, the Prevention Compact is one case where there is such a thing as a free lunch.