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Treat health care like any other human right



Your Turn
Demond Meeks
Guest columnist

As a former labor organizer, I helped thousands of health-care workers fight for a stronger health care system and a healthier Rochester.

It is an injustice that we continue to demand health-care equity for so many low-income New Yorkers who rely on Medicaid coverage for their health insurance.

The governor's continued failure to fully fund Medicaid is a moral decision. Over seven million New Yorkers rely on Medicaid for their health care, the majority of whom come from Black and Latino communities.

While Medicaid provides essential coverage to these New Yorkers, and our hospitals give every patient 100%, the state's Medicaid program pays New York hospitals and nursing homes 30% less than the actual cost of care that they deliver.

This not only puts a tremendous financial strain on our hospitals and health-care workers, it seems New York is treating vulnerable, low-income residents as if they are 30% less than a person. This is an opportunity for Gov. Hochul to be a pioneer and to correct this longstanding disparity.

The Medicaid system has been ne-

glected. We made small strides last year, however, we can not justify minimal action due to previous lack of action by other administrations. We must do what is necessary to fully fund Medicaid.

Gov. Hochul, we are counting on you to work with our legislators to make this right. It's simple: when hospitals are not properly funded, they struggle to deliver high-quality care. Chronic underfunding means reductions in critical services, insufficient staffing levels, overcrowded emergency rooms, and delays in patient and resident care.

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In the Rochester region, hospitals and nursing homes such as UPMC's Strong Memorial Hospital continue to face overcrowding and bed shortages due to the persistent underfunding of Medicaid and lack of available nursing home beds to continue care. At hospitals like UPMC, Medicaid and uninsured patients make up 72 percent of hospital admissions.

That means that Rochester residents living in poverty — nearly a third of our city's population — bear the brunt of Medicaid underfunding firsthand, often

facing understaffed and overwhelmed hospitals, and longer wait times when they seek care. This begets an unfortunate cycle that we have grown far too comfortable with.

People who live in poverty are more likely to experience health care because they face barriers to care when they become sick, and don't have access to the same preventative care as their wealthier counterparts. The result? A health-care system that only deepens disparities, where the care you receive is contingent on where you live and how much money you make.

It is unacceptable that our neighbors disadvantaged by the system do not have equal access to quality healthcare because Gov. Hochul refuses to increase Medicaid reimbursements. Our state is sitting on massive cash reserves, and the federal government will pay more than half the cost to fix this crisis.

By raising the Medicaid reimbursement rate, our governor can address health-care disparities and stabilize hospitals across the state, including those right here in Rochester, allowing them to grow critical services needed to treat the most at-risk populations

Health care is a human right — every individual deserves equal access to health care regardless of their ZIP code or income level.

Demond Meeks is a member of the state Assembly.