



An Example of Consumer Engagement: The Massachusetts Helpline

The Challenge of Health Reform

Massachusetts's landmark health care reform plan, passed in 2006, opened up new insurance coverage for hundreds of thousands of residents. Many people had never had insurance before, and needed assistance navigating the often complex application and eligibility process. One of the major reasons that Massachusetts now has the lowest rate of uninsurance in the nation – 2.6 percent—is due to enrollment assistance provided to people new to health insurance.

Making it Successful: The Helpline

To help fill the information gap about Massachusetts's insurance programs, Health Care For All, a Boston-based non-profit consumer health advocacy organization, sponsored a toll-free Helpline, staffed by counselors who are experts on the new health care programs and receive ongoing training. Following health reform, the volume of Helpline calls rose rapidly, from around 500 per month to over 4,000. The counselors take calls in English, Spanish and Portuguese and help people apply for coverage, troubleshoot glitches, and navigate the health system. In addition, the state provides grants and trains dozens of community groups to provide outreach to people newly eligible for coverage, many of whom need specialized help from a person in their community with appropriate language capabilities.

Engaging the Consumer Voice

In addition to helping with enrollment and navigation of the health system, the Helpline and outreach workers have provided critical information to state officials throughout the implementation process by identifying and documenting trouble spots. This early feedback has enabled state officials to respond to problems as they arise. Researchers examining Massachusetts reform have also drawn on data from the Helpline and from individual callers experiencing programs who agreed to be interviewed.