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Women's health advocates question state plans for Well Woman Program

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MILWAUKEE -- Women's health advocates are urging the state to reconsider plans to restructure a program that offers free health services to low-income women.

Dawn Anderson, executive director of the Wisconsin Breast Cancer Coalition, told WisPolitics.com that her group -- officially the only state breast cancer group to focus on policy -- is now gathering support from other breast cancer organizations that normally avoid politics.

The groups are working together in support of the state's Well Woman Program, which provides free mammograms, cervical cancer screenings, multiple sclerosis testing and other services to low-income women without insurance.

"This Well Woman Program is so important that the two Wisconsin affiliates of the Susan Komen Foundation have linked elbows with us and we sent [a joint letter to the governor](#) ... to which we have gotten no response," said Anderson.

Nearly 300 women attending the Wisconsin Women's Health Summit in Milwaukee on Tuesday were given Gov. Scott Walker's phone number and urged to call him. One speaker, Sara Finger of the Wisconsin Alliance for Women's Health, made a call on stage. She told an aide who answered to tell Walker "that we really want the department (of Health Services) to slow things down and preserve the integrity of the Well Woman Program."

The program, administered by Wisconsin's Department of Health Services, and available in all of Wisconsin's 72 counties, is funded by the federal Centers for Disease Controls and Prevention's National Breast and Cervical Cancer Early Detection Program.

The breast cancer groups say the program is being drastically cut in a hasty reaction to the Affordable Care Act.

"In December, we heard from some of the local coordinators that the whole program was essentially blown up and restructured, so instead of having 72 local coordinators around the state, working to get women enrolled, linking them with providers and doing followup, they will go to six to 10 coordinators for the entire state," said Anderson. "Instead of 1,000 providers, which helps make access easy for these women, they will be working with just a few health systems around the state."

Jennifer Miller, communications specialist with the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, confirmed to WisPolitics that as of July 1, a "restructuring" of the Well Woman Program will occur, and that a smaller number of providers will be available to women statewide.

"The program is not going to be closed," said Miller, "but we expect the number of women who qualify will become smaller as more women are serviced by the ACA or BadgerCare."

"Why does this have to happen by July 1? That's what we're asking," Anderson said. "They don't know how many women will leave, or what areas of the state will be affected."

Asked to respond to concerns the restructuring is too hasty, Miller sent an email statement: "Our year three funding from CDC begins on June 30, but we don't know how much money that will be. Given that we anticipate receiving less funding from the CDC, and our expectation that WWWP will serve fewer women in the coming years because they will be receiving these screening services through ACA or BadgerCare Plus, it is appropriate to restructure the program at this time."

But Brittany Behm, spokeswoman for the CDC, told WisPolitics today that no decision has been made to reduce funding for women's health screenings and noted that funding nationwide last year was substantially increased.

In an email statement, Behm said: "Decisions about funding for the NBCCEDP and all other programs at the CDC are made annually by Congress. In the recently passed fiscal year (FY) 2014 appropriations bill, Congress provided almost \$10 million more to the NBCCEDP than it did for FY 2013. CDC makes individual grantee funding decisions based on a variety of factors and these decisions are not made public until final award announcements are made at the end of June."

The Well Woman's Program is not the only issue prompting women's health advocates to contact lawmakers.

Nicole Safar of Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin said her organization has launched a phone campaign called, "We Are Talking About It Wednesdays."

"Every Wednesday, we ask our supporters to call the governor and talk about whatever issue they feel is important, such as public health funding or stop passing abortion restrictions or make health insurance affordable or fund BadgerCare," said Safar.

Since the campaign began about eight weeks ago, she said, "A lot of people have been getting through. We are tracking calls on our side and we're probably around 100 unique callers every week around the state, and we're continuing until (the legislative) session is over, because there are a couple of bad bills floating around out there that are processing."

Safar said the group is also calling Senate President Mike Ellis to protest a bill that would limit insurance payments for birth control, and another that imposes higher civil and criminal liability on physicians in abortion situations.

Maureen Kartheimer of March of Dimes Wisconsin has been contacting U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson and Congressman Paul Ryan to urge support of the federal Newborn Screening Saves Lives

Reauthorization Act and for the Accelerating the End of Breast Cancer Act.

In separate interviews, Kartheimer and Anderson each said they get the feeling that women's health concerns are too often linked to "entitlement" programs or social welfare.

"They assume we have a specific agenda," said Kartheimer. "Maybe we need to change how we talk about things."

-- *By Kay Nolan*
For WisPolitics.com